

BANDWAGON

JULY-AUGUST 2009



BANDWAGON

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Fred D. Pfening III, Managing Editor

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THE FRONT COVER

Stuart L. Thayer's death in late June was a great loss to the circus history community. His scholarship, particularly on the pre-Civil War era, was unprecedented and unmatched. He told the world far more about the nineteenth century American circus than any other individual. In 1994 he asked the author of his obituary to publish this photo in the article. It's easy to see why; it's archetypical Thayer, coat draped over the chair, mandatory tie on, sense of total concentration, researching his beloved ante-bellum circus at the Elephant Hotel, Somers, New York, July 1980. Photo by A. H. Saxon.

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2009 Circus Historical Society Election Candidates

This is a quadrennial election year for CHS. The following members have been nominated to serve eight-year terms as Trustees, beginning January 1, 2010:

Robert Cline started his circus career as a Junior Circus Model Builder, and then joined Circus Kirk in 1973. He performed between 1973 and 1995 doing an aerial cradle, comedy low wire and lion and tiger acts, and eventually owned his own tiger act for a few years. He has authored several lengthy articles on circus and carnival interests and has written a new book, *America's Elephants*. Bob is also a volunteer firefighter. Bob has his own circus blog and circus store website. He is CHS Secretary and is CHS co-webmaster.

Steve Flint shares the same birthday as P.T. Barnum. Now retired, he worked as a consultant for General Motors Corp. A member of the CHS since 1979, he served 2 terms as Superintendent of Construction for the Circus Model Builders, was on the board of Circus World Museum, Inc. for 10 years, and volunteered for 25 years in the wagon restoration shop at Circus World Museum. His interest in circus history focuses mainly on elephants and wagons.

Steve Gossard is a native of Illinois. He obtained both his bachelor's and master's degrees from Illinois State University at Normal, Illinois, concentrating his graduate studies in art history. He is Curator of Circus Collections of the Milner Library Special Collections at Illinois State University. Steve has studied and written extensively about the circus in Illinois, particularly the development of Bloomington and its environs as the aerial and trapeze act capital of the world. His book, *A Reckless Era of Aerial Performance, the Evolution of Trapeze*, is a major historical work.

John McConnell has simultaneously pursued two careers—one in business and one in circus. Business wise he has held several executive positions in corporations and operated a management consulting firm. Circus wise he has general managed and marketed the Royal Hanneford Circus and The Big Apple Circus. He has also marketed specific engagements for Cristiani Bros. Circus, Mills Bros. Circus, Zerbini International Circus, Circus Flora, Hamid Circus, Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus and Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. He owned and produced Circus Royale from 1986 through 2005, and he has written two books and several articles on circus history.

Joe Parker is a graduate of the University of Dallas (B.A., 1976), and the University of Portland (M. A., 1978), where he first discovered his fascination with the circus. He works for a computer-software and services firm in Dallas, Texas. He joined the CHS in 2000, and has been fortunate enough to attend every convention since, starting with 2001 in Baraboo. Several papers he presented at the CHS conventions have also been published in *Bandwagon*. He is the CHS Treasurer.

Fred D. Pfening, Jr. is the retired chairman of The Fred D. Pfening Co., a manufacturer of bakery equipment founded in 1919. He attended Ohio State University where he was editor of *Sundial*, the university humor magazine, and was a member of the O. S. U. Junior Class honorary society. He has been in the CHS longer than anyone else, having membership number 36. Pfening has edited the *Bandwagon* since 1961. He served as CHS President from 1958 to 1963. He has written over 125 articles for *Bandwagon*. Other articles have been published in *White Tops*, *American Cinemaphotographer* and various baking industry magazines.

John Polacsek became interested in tracing the routes of early circuses after discovering an 1835 metal printing plate that a branch of the Zoological Institute used to advertise their menagerie while traveling through Ohio. He extended his research and in 1974 produced *The History of the Circus and Menagerie in Ohio Prior to 1860*, as his Masters Thesis at Bowling Green State University. He used a number of newspapers, diaries, route cards, and route books to verify circus routes. He has also provided numerous photographs for the route books, and advertising of the Carson & Barnes Circus. He is a Past-President of the CHS.

For the last 10 years, Lane Talburt has taken advantage of his professional background as a television news film editor, script writer, and video producer to conduct video interviews with several hundred circus people—and circus historians—all over America. From these interviews, he has written numerous stories for *Bandwagon* and *White Tops*. And he has a backlog of videotaped interviews that he's still working through. In 2009 his video, "Conversations on the Contemporary Circus" was presented at the CHS convention.

Matthew Wittmann is Postdoctoral Fellow at the Bard Graduate Center in New York City, where he is working on a forthcoming exhibit and book about "The History of the Circus in America." Matt is just finishing work on a dissertation at the University of Michigan that focuses on American entertainers who traveled around the Pacific during the 19th century. He has twice made presentations at CHS conventions, most recently a paper entitled "Pirating the Pacific: The Fiji Cannibals and P. T. Barnum's Great Traveling World's Fair" this past summer.

Members will elect Trustees via mail ballot (See enclosed insert). Each member may vote either for a listed nominee or a person the members chooses to write-in. To be counted, a write-in vote must be cast for a current CHS member.

CHS Trustee Alan Campbell of Johns Creek, Georgia is the Election Commissioner. Ballots must be received no later than November 15, 2009 to be counted. The results will be announced in the November-December *Bandwagon*.

Stuart Thayer

By Fred D. Pfening III

Little in Stuart Thayer's background suggested his destiny was in a circus tent. His career as a field show historian is conformation that we don't choose our calling. How else to explain why a brilliant and urbane man would direct his considerable gifts to something seemingly as trivial as the study of the American circus? His contribution cannot be overstated. The quality of his scholarship is unprecedented and unmatched. His best work is the best ever written on the subject. Simply put: By the time of his death on 24 June he had taken American circus history to a level of sophistication unimagined a generation earlier. He answered questions no one else had the wit to ask.

The day he was born—27 March 1926—the *New Yorker*, then, like Thayer, in its infancy, published a circus-themed cover. It was clearly a portent, one of those cosmic coincidences, similar to Mark Twain's coming in and going out with Halley's Comet. His fascination with things sawdust began when an aunt took him to watch the big railroad shows unload in his hometown of Ann Arbor, Michigan. Soon he was building models of circus wagons. He even created his own extravaganza, Thayer's Wild Animal Show with its winter quarters in his parents' house.

He organized a backyard circus about 1938. In one act, his sister Nan was a lion; he, of course, was the trainer. The eclectic roster included the children of a socialist professor, a Jewish plumber, a county sheriff, an astronomer, a tool and die maker, and the two Thayer kids.

While he didn't frequent circuses as an adult, he was an avid fan in his youth, attending shows throughout southern Michigan. Like most other boys in 1934 he was a Clyde Beatty fan. That year Beatty spent about ten days in an Ann Arbor hospital after being seriously injured. Thayer and a buddy peaked into the nearly comatose star's room to see him lying in bed. He never forgot it.

Thayer was well versed enough in things spangled to recognize Felix Adler out of his clown makeup. About 1937, he got an autograph from Adler in the Ringling show's backyard. As the great clown and a friend walked away, the young admirer overheard Adler's companion say: "See, I told you people still know who you are!" He interpreted the remark as a response to Adler's fear that his celebrity was fading.

He literally had circus in his blood. He was related to the mid-nineteenth century circus owner Doctor James L. Thayer. The connection was tenuous; he claimed the showman was his 72nd cousin. "Always wondered where my circus interest came from," he wrote, as if DNA had anything to do with it.

Thayer's predilection for circus history began early. In his "Collectors' Corner" column in the 26 December 1942 *Billboard*, Fred Pitzer published a list of circus train wrecks. Soon after, the sixteen year old high school junior wrote him



The Thayer family, cr. 1936. Left to right, Nancy, Lyle, Louise, and Stuart. Photo courtesy Nan Thayer Ross.

that he had missed an accident on the Buffalo Bill Wild West in 1896. Pitzer ran the teenager's letter almost verbatim in the 10 April 1943 *Billboard*, the Spring Special no less. He poured on the praise, identifying the youngster as the owner-manager of the Thayer circus, and "an expert on show business." Would that he knew how prescient the description was.

Thayer didn't recall writing the letter when it was shown to him four decades later. When jokingly asked if his circus had grift, he replied: "As for grift on Thayer's Wild Animal Show, I don't remember; in fact, I don't remember anyone coming on the lot but me. That's why it folded, I guess."

He was an early member of the Circus Historical Society, joining about 1943 and receiving membership number eighty-one. He even got a by-line in a 1943 *Bandwagon* when he sent in an account of the 1895 Buffalo Bill program.

Soon after graduating from Ann Arbor High School in the spring of 1944, he was drafted into the army. After basic training, he was assigned to Fort Knox, Kentucky for training as a tank corpsman. He served in the First Army, Third Armored Division, 32nd Regiment, Company D whose troops fought their way from Normandy to Belgium to the Rhine to the Ruhr and the Harz Mountains deep within Germany. It was affectionately called the Third Herd and the Spearhead Division, the latter name stemming in part from it often being the lead American division in combat.

Thayer was in the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944 and January 1945. The Third Armored reached the Rhine on 4 March 1945. It then pushed on into Cologne, Germany's third largest city, where, in the shadow of the great medieval cathedral, a major tank battle took place. Amid the rubble that was once Cologne, Thayer's tank took a direct hit from a German bazooka. Everyone inside immediately bailed out. Thayer didn't realize he been wounded for some time. For the rest of his life he carried shrapnel in his leg for which he received a Purple Heart.

Thayer about sixteen years old. Photo courtesy Nan Thayer Ross.



After a stint in the infirmary he returned to the front. In April his division captured the city of Nordhausen, Germany, home to two concentration camps that provided slave labor for the manufacture of V-1 and V-2 rockets. The carnage in the camps was beyond imagining. The horrified Americans found over 3000 decomposing corpses, the dead far outnumbering the living. The soldiers rounded up German locals to dig a trench for a mass grave. One half-dead survivor asked a GI if the U. S. army accepted Jews. When told it did, the man begged to enlist immediately. Thayer had just turned nineteen.

The day after his company liberated the camps in Nordhausen, it came upon two teenagers who, it turned out, had escaped from the death camp at Auschwitz. The Americans gathered up the starving kids, and put them to work in the company kitchen. It was a casual decision made impulsively by the enlisted men; the soldiers gave the incident little moment. To the two young men, however, it was a last minute reprieve from a death sentence. One of them later immigrated to the United States where he joined the Army. He served over 20 years, retiring as a Major. He was finally reunited with his unlikely saviors in an emotional reunion in 2002.

The campaigning finally ended on 23 April when the 3rd Armored took the town of Dessau, situated about half way between Berlin and Leipzig. On the 25th the division was relieved. The war in Europe ended a little over two weeks later. Thayer's division was reorganizing to go to the Pacific when Japan capitulated on 15 August, ending history's most ghastly chapter. The Third Armored was in combat 231 days with 16,122 casualties including 2540 killed. It lost more tanks in battle than any other American division.

After the hostilities ended he was assigned to the athletic division of the Army's Special Services where he was put in charge of running the military baseball league for the European theater. He was essentially the baseball commissioner of Germany. His duties included outfitting twenty-four teams,

scheduling games, arranging for publicity and travel, and reporting scores to Armed Forces Radio. He wrote a light-hearted account of his tenure as baseball boss in *Sports Illustrated* in 1988.

World War II was the transforming event of his life. Like many other soldiers he was profoundly affected by his experience, both emotionally and intellectually. His sister attributed the hint of melancholy that floated just below the surface of his personality to the war. Likewise, his agnosticism may have had its origin in the cataclysm. He read hundreds of books on the conflagration, and wrote a memoir about it in 1985 entitled *All My Boys are Growing Old*. When he told friends that, "Germany f**ked up the 20th century," he was speaking from experience.

He was a regular at the Company D reunions from the first one in 1972 until he could no longer travel. The years took their toll; by 2002 only 17 of the original 130 men in the company were still living. On the occasions when his army get-together day-and-dated a circus event; he always opted to join his comrades in arms. He had a good line about these gatherings: "Reunions are a way of throwing rocks at time."

Thayer helped many of his buddies' families learn the details of their relative's war experience. He was often able to share the circumstances of their loved one's deaths with them. He even figured out who was in the German bazooka unit that hit his tank in Cologne. When he shared his research with descendants of one of the Nazi soldiers involved, they confirmed his description of the battle. It turned out that the young man who led the anti-tank unit was killed in action a

The family in 1944, just before Stuart went overseas. Photo courtesy Nan Thayer Ross.





Sherman tanks patrol Cologne, early March, 1945. Great medieval cathedral in right background.

few days after firing on Thayer's tank.

After mustering out in late 1945, he enrolled at the University of Michigan where he majored in English literature with the intention of becoming a writer. After graduating in 1951, he joined his father's insurance agency. While he was successful in the business, it rarely engaged him. His sister thought he joined the company out of a sense of family loyalty; although the desire to eat regularly must have also been a factor. In another karmic oddity, during this time he and Doug Holwadel, later co-owner of the Beatty-Cole Circus, both had space in the same Ann Arbor office building. They knew one another, but not that the other had any interest in circus.

He married Marilyn Sullivan in 1953; their son Preston was born the next year. Thayer claimed he wanted to name him Steven after the Stevens Hotel in Chicago where he was conceived. His wife, with some justification, thought that was an idiotic idea and their son was instead named after a family friend.

In 1966 Thayer decided to build a model of the 1916 Ringling Bros. Circus parade. His search for photos of the wagons brought him into contact with Richard E. Conover, then the country's leading field show historian. Conover immediately recognized Thayer's analytical and research skills, writing a friend in October 1968: "I was visited Monday evening and most of yesterday by Stuart Thayer of Ann Arbor. He is now interested in building a model of the 1916 Ringling parade, but he also has the natural talents to be a hell of a researcher. . . . He is about 40 years old and [it] would take little urging to [get him] to branch out." Thayer credited Conover with reviving his interest in circus history and encouraging him to write.

And write he did. Starting in 1969, Thayer published approximately 100 articles in *Bandwagon*. His first effort was an overview of the Russell Bros. Circus. An article co-written with Conover on Ringling cages was next. It was the first of his many excursions into parade wagon history. His talent for discerning connections and patterns between wagons surfaced in the Ringling analysis where he observed that the carvings on Ringling's 1893 tableau cages matched those on some of the show's less decorative dens. At the time, parade vehicle history was one of the most studied areas of

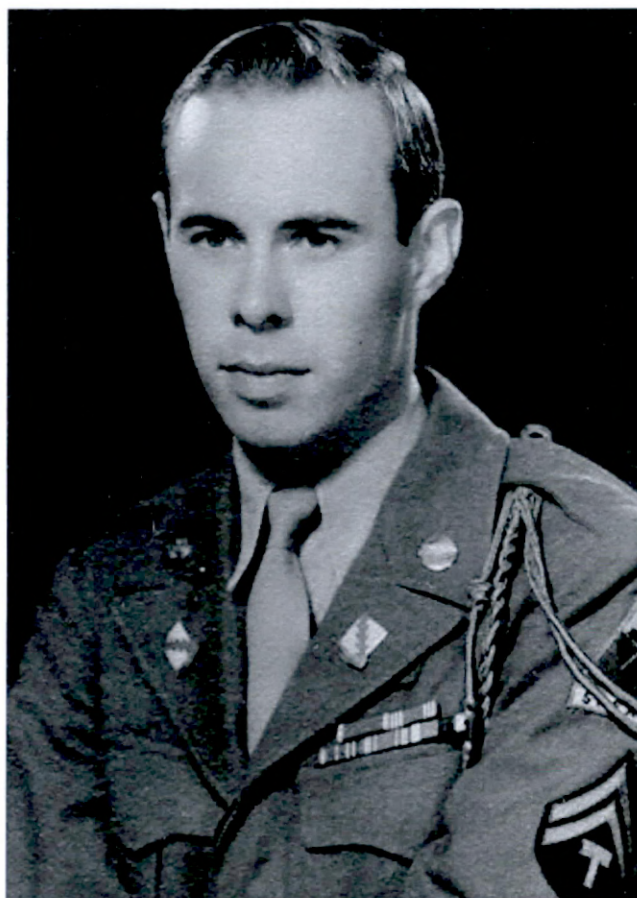
show scholarship, and his discovery was considered a major achievement. No one teased more information out of old photographs than Thayer. He pioneered the technique of analyzing teamsters' helmets and uniforms, and horses' harness to identify and date photographs. Even Conover, who was rarely impressed with others' work, thought Thayer was a coming star.

During the next two years he continued writing about twentieth century circuses and cages. In 1971 he wrote the history of the 1870 Dan Castello Circus, his first foray into the nineteenth century where he soon found his intellectual home. He also published pieces on the Egyptian and Oriental influences on parade wagons in which he related circus vehicle design to trends in mainstream culture.

That year he published his first major work, an eighty page pamphlet entitled *Mudshows and Railers: The American Circus in 1879*. Contemporary newspapers were his main source. He read fifty dailies and weeklies from forty-three cities, a prodigious number at the time. He dedicated the book to Conover, who had died earlier in the year. A few days after attending Conover's funeral he wrote a friend: "We have lost a great guy. To those of us who were serious about this esoteric research he was absolutely selfless in time and information." The same was true of Thayer.

He became active in the CHS during this period. He

Thayer in uniform 1945. Photo courtesy Preston Thayer.



rejoined the organization in 1967, and attended his first convention the following year. He served as Vice-President in 1972 and 1973, and President from 1974 to 1977. He also wrote a column called "One Sheet" for *Bandwagon* in which he discussed historical topics too small to justify as an article, but important enough to publish. He once even served as Election Commissioner.

By the early 1970s his fascination with circus history had him by the throat. He purchased a microfilm reader and films of early newspapers so he could research his passion at home. He started going to work early, and leaving around 2:00 p. m. for his daily date with the past. By the time he retired he was spending a week a month in libraries and historical societies in every state east of the Mississippi River. Finally, in 1975 he sold his company. He was forty-nine years old when he decided to devote the remainder of his life to studying the American circus.



Joking around with sister Nan at her 1951 high school graduation. Photo courtesy Nan Thayer Ross.

He loved it. Until age and health slowed him down, he spent six to eight hours most days "resolving the various questions," he wrote, "a mountain of material presented." He read and re-read the notes he assiduously gathered, studying the material to determine patterns, generalizations, exceptions, contrasts and similarities, often using statistical analysis to understand developments. Most importantly, he charted the changes and continuities that are the essence of historical investigation. Such techniques had been used by academic historians forever, but Thayer was the first to apply these methods to the study of field shows.

He concentrated on what he called "the rituals of man-

agement," the business of circusing, and the interaction between shows and the society and culture at large. It was intellectual history to him, his way of understanding nineteenth century America. The circus was the telescope through which he observed the historical landscape.

In 1970 he began work on his monumental *Annals of the American Circus*. Using George C. D. Odell's fifteen-volume *Annals of the New York Stage* as his model, he took on the quixotic task of recording all American circuses prior to the Civil War. While no period of field show history had received much scholarly attention, the ante-bellum era was practically *terra incognita* as little research in primary sources had been done in it.

One reason historians shied away from the early period was the dearth of primary source material. Only a few broadsides and handbills survived, and manuscripts and financial documents were very limited. He realized to do the job thoroughly he needed to read thousands and thousands of newspapers. That was a problem because scores of repositories needed to be visited. Few locations could justify a stay of more than a few days.

Published in 1976, the first volume of *Annals*, covering the years 1793 to 1829, presented a completely original picture of the beginnings of the American circus. It instantly superseded virtually all prior scholarship on the era. It analyzed topics rarely studied for any epoch of show history, let alone the early period for which the raw data was limited. Previous writers had tried to put together the jigsaw puzzle of the circus's start with only a few of the pieces. Thayer found almost all the missing pieces, and then put the puzzle together. It was as if a professional historian had not only discovered a couple of previously unknown Presidents, but also documented their beliefs and policies.

The magnitude of his achievement was so great that it was underappreciated by many circus history aficionados, most of whom were not aware how insubstantial previous work had been. Important as the new information was, the interpretive passages made the book even more remarkable. The best of these was his analysis of the impact of tents. He discovered that J. Purdy Brown was the originator of the circus big top in 1825. For the first time the circus wasn't tethered to urban centers along the Atlantic seaboard, and was able to travel into the hinterlands, making it a national institution. Thayer was the first to recognize the revolutionary nature of the change.

The next volume of *Annals*, published in 1987, took the story up to 1847. In 1992, the third and final book came out, bringing the circus to the eve of the Civil War. It took twenty-two years to complete. He visited over 120 libraries and archives, and read over 100,000 newspapers, an incredible number in the pre-Internet, pre-OCS age. In 2000 the entire work was collected into a single volume of 659 pages.

In 1997 he distilled the wisdom and knowledge gathered from *Annals* into a beautifully written little masterpiece called *Traveling Showmen*. Organized topically, the book explored the origin and development of the business side of the traveling, tented circus. It also placed field shows in the context of Jacksonian America, exploring the impact of societal forces such as western population movement and improvements in transportation. Reading the book is a humbling experience. After only a few pages the reader

becomes painfully aware how little he knew about the period. It is the smartest circus book ever written.

Annals and *Traveling Showmen* brought a previously unknown level of research and analysis to the study of circus history. He examined the ante-bellum period with a thoroughness unequaled before or since for any period of show history. These two books are his legacy. No one ever said more about circus history in fewer words.

He suffered a personal tragedy while working on the second installment of *Annals* when his wife died from cancer in May 1979. Adrift, he moved to Portland, Maine in 1981 to be near his sister. He left his model circus wagons in his Ann Arbor home when he sold it. They may still be there.

Proud dad with son Preston, 1957.

In October 1981, an attorney friend in Seattle suggested he come out to meet a woman who the lawyer believed was a good match for Thayer. He was right. In February 1982 he married Boyka Davis. The couple moved back to Portland after the wedding where they remained until 1984. When she expressed a desire to return to the Seattle area, he assented. He lived there the rest of his life.

While his contributions to *Bandwagon* fell off while he devoted himself to his great project, he still published many significant pieces in the journal. A history of Connecticut's anti-circus laws was one of the first attempts to examine anti-circus prejudice in New England. A study of Vermont's efforts to regulate circuses through taxation was another inquiry into the interface between field shows and governments. Articles on the origins of the side show, the cook house and concessions all broke new ground. One on minstrelsy's circus beginnings shed new light on that important institution. Another explored the circus's connection with the 1858 Lincoln-Douglass debates.

He wrote short biographies of many nineteenth century showmen and performers. Jacob Driesbach, Chauncey Weeks, Joe Pentland, and Ben Brown, among others, were subjects of articles. He took a special interest in circus riders, sketching the careers of many equestrians such as James Hunter, Eaton Stone, Levi North and James Robinson. He considered Robinson the best ever.

He examined the histories of individual parade wagons in numerous pieces. He wrote a few season histories, including ones on the Barnum show in 1872 and 1873, and Rufus Welch's disastrous 1853 tour. He even invaded the twentieth century twice. One was an affectionate biography of bandman Carl Robinson who Thayer had met over twenty years earlier while working on an article on the Tom Mix Circus. The other was a fascinating study of the business transactions that occurred before the Ringling Circus appeared in Monroe, Michigan on 30 June 1916. His last essay in the journal, written shortly before his death, was on full-size railroad circuses prior to the 1872 Barnum show. It was typ-

ical Thayer: short, to the point, well-documented, with enough new information to revise the prevailing interpretation of events.

While most of his *Bandwagon* submissions were narrow in scope and only a few pages in length, a few explored larger topics. A biographical census of all elephants in America before the Civil War appeared in 1987 and 1991. A history of menageries was another major project. Many of his *Bandwagon* articles are collected on the Circus Historical Society's

website (circushistory.org) under the title *American Circus Anthology*.

In 1998 he and Fred Dahlinger, Jr. co-authored *Badger State Showmen*, a history of Wisconsin circuses. That same year he and William Slout wrote *Grand Entrée*, a history of the Barnum Circus from 1871 to 1875. Both were strong narratives and solid contributions to circus scholarship.

The Performers: A History of Circus Acts, published in 2005, was his last book to appear during his lifetime. It examined the typical performance before the Civil War. He concluded that while some new acts were introduced and others modified, for the most part the in-ring presentation and the order in which it was given

didn't change very much over the sixty-seven years studied. The book used the structure of Antony Hippisley Cox's 1951 classic *A Seat at the Circus*, which chronicled the story of English circus acts. While Thayer's scope was less ambitious than Hippisley Cox's, *The Performers* is by far the best overview of American circus performances.

Thayer completed a biography of Adam Forepaugh not long before he died. For years he evinced no interest in the old German, but finally warmed to him. He even came to admire his business acumen. "Poor Forepaugh," he wrote in 2002, "nobody remembers him but us. He's the Luis Firpo of the circus world," a reference to the now forgotten boxer of the 1920s who came close to knocking out Jack Dempsey. Completing the book was a struggle as his energy flagged as his health deteriorated. While his capacity for sustained intellectual effort diminished as he grew older, his acuity never wavered. The Forepaugh book will eventually appear as will a number of unpublished short articles and research papers that he circulated among the circus history community.

No one thought about circus history more than Thayer. His letters reveal the process of analysis and discovery as he divined insights, conclusions and new questions out of the sources. For example, in 2007 he emailed a friend: "As I see it this recreational rioting was mainly frustration at the dull lives the village folk lived. The circus as a group of outsiders enjoyed little of the protections we now take for granted in society. Any excuse, such as a crappy concert, was enough to turn the audience into a mob. A clown's obscenity, a show-girl's skimpy costume, a dissatisfied loser at a grifter's game, all were sparks to set off a 'dust up.'" Another from 1977: "I'm about to write a composite profile of the Flatfoots, putting in everything I know about any of them, other than



~~target~~ { FRANKLIN & JOHNSON - HARTFORD - 4/15/99 - ? 1 READ COURANT
 WEST & CO - HARTFORD - AUGUST, 1817 1 READ 3 PAPERS
 JW BAKER - HARTFORD - 11/4 TO ? , 1824 (GONE BY IT) 1 READ CONN COURANT
 MAC RACKEN - HARTFORD - MAY ? 1825 TO 6/4 1 READ AM. MERCURY
 AM MERC
 CONN COURANT

Litchfield Enquirer 1/40 - 12/44

X ^{5/28} ~~2/28~~ 10 JTA & Co for 6/6/40 (cut one gir) giraffe etc
 also cosmic virus and banac for 12 1/2

X ^{5/23/44} ³⁰ Raymond & Co (lion on bridge) 6/1
 location for pavilion (sic) on the ground annually
 used for the cattle fair, a grass plot beautifully
 adapted. 4 ele team on bus 30 wags
 Drusbach

Hartford Daily Courant

X ^{5/20/40} ²¹ JTA & Co 5/27 & 28 4 vacant lot near the RR depot
 A.H. Mead agent same ad as Litchfield
 22, 23, 24, 25

X ^{9/16/42} Raymond Ogden & Co NY Merag (cut bull)
 on the lot in front of the RR depot 9/16 & 17 Drusbach
 Enfield 15 Windsor 19

X ^{5/31/43} ^{6/2, 3, 5, 6} Great Zool Exhibition (lion on bridge)
 6/7 & 8 4 ele on music car Drusbach
 South Green, at foot of Main St 254

X → ^{6/7} letter from Natl Intelligence by R.P. Willis of NY
 (over)
^{5/13/46} Van Amburgh roman chariot 10th row
 X ^{16, 15,} ^{5/21 & 22} South Green
 16, 17

21-1d - probably no less than 4 or 5000
 persons attended the perf

their show careers. . . . Right now, I think of them as dry-land Yankee sailors; the equivalent of the wet ones that Samuel [Eliot] Morison wrote about. However, why they went into show business escapes me. It had to be more than money. Adventure, maybe?" Sometimes lack of evidence was noteworthy. From 1973: "What was there about Barnum that caused other showmen to ignore him in their memoirs, etc.? We have almost no references to him from other showmen." Or in another case from 1971: "I have come to the conclusion that Hyatt Frost operated on the cheap. If you look at his rosters over the years you won't find one star performer. I think he used all second raters or Europeans whom he could get for nothing. The menagerie was big and expensive, of course, and he seldom advertised who his performers were."

Thayer on vacation in France, early 1980s. Photo courtesy Boyka Thayer.

He was fascinated by the why, where, and when of routing, how showmen reached the all-important decisions that made or broke their seasons. He poured over routes for clues as an accountant would a spreadsheet. He developed different ways of analyzing routes statistically, hoping for a pattern that would disclose show managers' thinking. It was a complex subject with many variables, and determining the significance of different factors was elusive. He could get a little arcane as the following 1987 letter to the author suggests: "I noted that [Rufus] Welch kept going into NY state from 1840 on . . . and Fred [Dahlinger] said he thought it was natural to keep playing a profitable area. This led me to wonder if he [Welch] squeezed out the smaller shows as a result, which led me to suppose that the smaller shows then looked for new territory which led me back to your frontier theory. . . . Think about it." While he wrote extensively about routing, he never reached a definitive conclusion. There may not be one.

His correspondence was an arena for his droll sense of humor. Once he mildly rebuked a friend for overusing a cliché: "Why do they [circuses] always 'limp back to quarters?' Just once I'd like to hear of a show lurching or slouching or sneaking or sliding back to winter quarters." Another time he straightened out Fred Dahlinger and the author: "Both you and Dahlinger have asked me to do a paper delineating the difference between the circus and the menagerie. I can't understand the need for one. Am I missing something? The difference seems very clear to me. One has piles of turds at the end of the day."

His blazing wit and sense of the bizarre was universally admired. In 1992 he wrote Richard Reynolds: "Boyka and self just returned from Santa Fe—don't go. Spent five days in a two day town." In 1991 he had an idea for a CHS convention: "We should have the CHS convention in St. Joe, Missouri, and gather round the grave of Billie Allee [the first collector of circus memorabilia]. Maybe we could get an ele-

phant to lay a . . . wreath. And sing the CHS song, the one that ends, 'and when she saw what the elephant had, she wouldn't come home with me.' Can't you just hear the gang belting that out? Brings a tear to the eye." Having difficulty getting permission to use an old photograph, he wrote, "George Eastman [House] owns it and threatens any use of it that's not paid for; castration was the muttered threat. Of course, that doesn't scare me."

While he usually closed his letters with the standard Sincerely or Regards, from time to time he used a comic close: Send Money, Yours in Paste, Circusly, Coughingly, and Good Night, Bob, Good Night Ray, the last a reference to a popular comedy team of the 1950s. In mid-December 1988 he signed off this way: "Merry Xmas, Happy New Year, Grassy Lots and Short Hauls. Does that cover it?"

He was self effacing. In 2001 he wrote a colleague: "Soooo, if I give you questionable info at any time, call me on it, I won't mind. . . . Meanwhile, as long as my eyes still follow motion and my socks match, I'll plug ahead." Another time, this one in 1980: "June & Turner did not have two units in

1845 as my magic chart indicates; I misread my *home town paper* [italics in original]! Don't tell anyone." In 1997, he commented to Reynolds: "Traveling wears me out, research tires, airplanes threaten me with infection, yet I plunge on; the common good my goal. Unselfish, unsparing and (I often find these days) unzipped."

On occasion he manifested a cock-eyed logic so absurd that the observer could do nothing but admire his brilliance with slack-jawed wonder. His explanation why so many male elephants appeared in early menageries is a case in point: "My theory on why so many male elephants came over before the Civil War is: The Indians were putting one over on the white man. Males were only good for breeding, the females could work. Thus, foist the males off on the white man for three times what they're worth. [Conspiracy theorist] Lynden LaRouche claims that was what the Bhopal tragedy was all about—getting even with the dinges [Europeans] for foisting all those males elephants on us." On another occasion, he found a cost savings missed by James A. Bailey: "Thought for the day: At its height of size, Barnum & Bailey hired 600 workmen a year, and bought 600 monkeys a year. Now, if they could have taught the monkeys how to put it up and tear it down. . . ."

He had a mild case of absent-minded professoritis. Once, driving to a CHS convention he and two companions went in a McDonalds for a quick sandwich. Never having been to a McDonalds before nor ever given a second's thought to the fast food industry, he went directly to a table to wait for the menu, silverware and water to be brought to him, expressing genuine surprise when told he needed to go to the counter to order. In the 1950s he and his wife repeatedly got lost while driving through Europe. Finally, it occurred to Mrs. Thayer that the maps were all wrong. Not unreasonably, she asked her husband where he got these



1867

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	TOTAL
1						QUINCY S	MISSOURI KANSAS CITY			LITTLE ROCK			
2						HANNIBAL MO	"			FT. SCOTT			
3	* 7/4 BLOWDOWN					BOLIVAR	"						
4						LA GRANGE							
5						TERRE HAUTE	MONTICELLO						
6										GREENFIELD			
7										SPRINGFIELD			
8						DANVILLE IL				" MO			
9										FERDUND			
10						LA PLATA							
11						MASON ILL				OMAHA NE			
12								MAVSVILLE					
13						CLARENCE	WARRENDALE MO						
14													
15								STEVENSVILLE					
16						BLOOMINGS IL							
17						MEXICO							
18						PEORIA	FULTON						
19						OPENED S							
20	9/20 TRIPLE DAY & RAIN					COLUMBUS	PRINCETON TN			ST. LOUIS MO			
21	5/21 BLEW TOULON - MUD						TOULON			FT. SMITH AR			
22	5/22 BLEW VICTORIA - MUD					SEYMOUR	VICTORIA	GLASSBORO					
23							SALESBORO			ATLANTIC CITY			
24										VALLEY SPRING TX			
25						MONMOUTH NJ				OSKALOUSA			
26	5/26 - To RAILS - MUD									LAWRENCE			
27						PRAIRIE CITY	CARROLLTON	LINNEUS		FT. SMITH			
28						MACOMB	RICHMOND				HENDERSON TX		
29						AUGUSTA	LEXINGTON						
30						PONTIAC MI	S	CHILLICOTTE	JOSEPH				
31						QUINCY				LITTLE ROCK		BENTON TX	(HOUSTON JAN.

Mrs Agnes Lake mgr
B.M. Stevens advert
Wm Lake
Alice Lake
Emma Lake
Laura
Mast Willie

SunMercury adds:
Dan Rhodes asst mgr
John Burt agt
James Bailey asst agt
Cordelia Lake
Wm Sparks
King family(8f 2men)
Wm Smith
Wm Nichols
Hiram Marks
Sheller Bros

9/30/11 Billboard. 1867 Lake Circus.

Unconfirmed, perhaps apochryphal story. Played Luray, MO on a Monday, overland from Alexandria. First circus since Van Amburgh, 1860 (not true), possibly last circus to visit Luray. After the circus the show people gave one of those peurile concerts which have served for several generations to induce the introduction of new phrases in profanity in those who are induced to pay their money to hear the silly songs, etc. The concert aroused the ire of the young men of the town which led to a tremendous free fight following the closing number of the concert. Next morning, fight still raging, circus sought to leave. Townies with axes chopped the spokes of the wheels. Then they threw the immobilized wagons into the Wyaconda River from a bridge. Twenty five years later the wagons, or what was left of them, could still be seen where the river emptied into the lowlands (toward the Mississippi). The unknown author said he saw a wagon wheel there in 1909

faulty maps. He replied they were the ones he used the last time he traveled in Germany—in 1945, in a tank—and they worked perfectly well then.

He was unfailingly helpful to others who toiled in the same vineyard, or even a neighboring one. "I can't find it in my heart to deny another researcher," he wrote. When Matt Wittmann, a Ph. D. candidate, contacted him for information on Pacific Rim circuses, Thayer sent him his entire file on the subject, telling him to keep it; he didn't need it anymore. He didn't have much attachment to material things. He regularly gave friends his notes and manuscript drafts of books. To visit his house was to leave with a book.

He wore his erudition lightly. He had little interest in impressing anyone. He self-published his books, usually with miniscule press runs. Aside from sending libraries cards on his books' availability and running an ad or two in *Bandwagon*, he made little effort to promote them. Doubtless his work will eventually be republished.

He didn't have much ego wrapped up in his scholarship, which may in part explain why someone with big league talent chose to play in the low minors. He realized directing so much intellectual energy to such an insignificant subject was slightly ridiculous. As he noted to a friend in 1983: "It occurred to me last night that civilization as we know it is about to end. When grown men occupy their time chronicling the history of something as unimportant as the circus there is bound to be an interruption."

Nevertheless he loved the intellectual give and take of batting ideas around, testing theories against evidence, and fitting new information into existing paradigms. "I haven't had a good Greco-Roman no holds barred bit of circus talk," he wrote the author shortly before he died, "since you were here last." He was disappointed that he rarely received feedback on his work, wondering on occasion if anyone read it. "It's easy to be an expert," he noted, "when one is the only Richmond on the field."

Asked for his credo in 1994, he responded: "My grandfather credited his long life to always drinking good whiskey and never sitting in damp churches, and that just about sums up my approach." He was a top shelf guy who availed himself of the finer things in life as often as possible. He enjoyed good hotels, good food, good wine and good conversation, not necessarily in that order. He had a preference for wool and cotton garments from Brooks Brothers, and seemingly always wore a coat and tie. Asked why, he said the better he was dressed, the better service he received, whether in a restaurant or research facility. That explanation, of course, did not account for why he dressed that way on days he knew he wasn't leaving his house.

He liked sports, especially baseball, belonging at one time to the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR). He started life as a Detroit Tigers fan; he could recite the team's 1938 line up man for man. He kept his childhood baseball card collection most of his life. After moving to Maine, he became a Boston Red Sox roter via television. While he and his wife often attended Mariners games after moving to Seattle, he didn't change his allegiance. As he wrote an old friend in 1984: "The BoSox are in town for four and Boyka

and I are going to see them tonight and Sunday. Hope my man, Oil Can Boyd, pitches. After watching them on the tube for two years in Portland, they're like old friends. And like most of my old friends, they're losers."



Rare image of Thayer riding Carson and Barnes elephant at CHS convention in Akron, Ohio, 1983. Wife Boyka in front and Sara Blackstone in middle. John Polacsek photo.

He correctly called himself an "omnivorous reader." The *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* were morning visitors almost all his adult life. He mainly read literature when he was younger; he admired Hemmingway's tight, no-nonsense style. As he grew older he read history, and lots of it. He pursued military history with the rapaciousness of a starving hyena, especially World War II and the Napoleonic Wars. General European history was also on the agenda. He knew his way around historical scholarship, plowing through, for example, all three volumes of Fernand Braudel's *Civilization and Capitalism 15th-18th Century*, the finest historical treatise of the twentieth century. He read baseball books when he wanted lighter fare.

The deeper he wandered into the nineteenth century circus, the more he concentrated on American economic and social history. He read virtually every issue of the *Billboard* before about 1920 and the *New York Clipper* before 1900. He was well versed in the memoir and secondary literature of the circus. He may have been the only person to have read every issue of *White Tops* before 1960, and was certainly the only one familiar with Circus Fans Association's internecine squabbles in the 1920s.

While he was never known to refuse a drink, he was moderate in his habits with the exception of cigarette smoking, which once was the cause of his fracturing his hip. While he and Dave Price were visiting the Parthenon in Nashville, Thayer snuck out a side door to sate his addiction. Paying



Stuart and *Bandwagon* editor Fred D. Pfening, Jr., 1991 CHS convention, Charleston, South Carolina. John Polacsek photo.

more attention to his craving than his location, he took one step too many and fell on his side about four feet, busting his hip. When he later showed his wife the scene of the crime, he made a point to say, "That's where Dave pushed me."

Over the years he made a few half-hearted efforts to quit tobacco, none of which lasted more than a few months. The final attempt came in 2004 after he had contracted emphysema. About three months after he quit, he read in the *Wall Street Journal* that twenty years were required to repair the damage to his lungs. Figuring, correctly as it turned out, that he didn't have twenty years in front of him, he happily resumed the practice.



Stuart and Boyka, 1995. Photo courtesy Boyka Thayer.

Interesting people found him interesting. In 1980 Thayer and the author spent a pleasant evening discussing western history with a Pulitzer Prize winning historian. The esteemed professor, who had a little juice in him, told us his version of how popular entertainment was organized on the Mississippi River around 1855. Thayer then quietly but relentlessly cited piece after piece of evidence that contradicted his ideas. He occasionally ran into scholars while doing research, and developed friendships with a number of them, notably Warren Susman, whose premature death in 1985 ended what might have been a fruitful collaboration.

He and a scholar working on minstrelsy once found them



Stuart and Bill Slout, cr. 2005. Photo courtesy Fred Dahlinger.

selves in the same archive. After getting acquainted, each discovered the other's work helped in better understanding their own. He lectured at the University of Tampa, Webster College, and St. Mary's College. In 1990 he presented a paper on traveling menageries at the Smithsonian Institution's symposium on zoo history.

In the mid-1990s he became friends with August Wilson, a Tony Award and two time Pulitzer Prize winner, best known for *The Pittsburgh Cycle*, a series of ten plays depicting the African-American experience in each decade of the twentieth century. They met for coffee two or three times a week. Thayer enjoyed the sparkling conversation, and was fascinated to observe artistic genius up close. They were often joined by others, including an antiquarian bookseller and a screen writer. One wag called the group Seattle's answer to New York's fabled Algonquin Hotel Round Table of the 1920s.

His death was preposterous. On the warm, sunny afternoon of 15 June he was walking in his neighborhood, as he often did. As he was crossing the street, a Honda Civic driven by an eighty-nine year old man smashed into him. He was steps away from the safety of the street's other side. Paramedics and police soon arrived and he was taken to a hospital where he was diagnosed with multiple fractures in his ankle, leg, shoulder and ribs. He was unable to breathe on his own. He struggled on for nine days, but on 24 June the trauma of the injuries and eighty-three years caught up with him. He never regained consciousness.

He was cremated and his remains buried on 7 August at the Tahoma National Cemetery in Kent, Washington, where he rests along side other members of the Greatest Generation who saved the world in the 1940s. On 9 August an open house was held at his and Boyka's home where friends and family shared their memories of him. The circus history fraternity was represented by the author and Fred Dahlinger.

Since Thayer didn't believe in an afterlife one doubts that this gentle, generous skeptic went to the big lot, circus jargon for the next world. Perhaps in his case we should imagine he's gone to the big library where there are no gaps in southern newspaper runs, smoking is encouraged, every piece of field show ephemera is easily accessible, adult beverages are available, the finding aids are fabulous, a superb buffet is only steps away, and, of course, the staff is knowledgeable, helpful and attentive—especially if you're wearing a coat and tie.

RESOLUTION BY THE
CIRCUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY
HONORING THE MEMORY OF STUART LeROY THAYER
(1926-2009)

WHEREAS, Stuart LeRoy Thayer was the eighty-first member of the Circus Historical Society, and served as President of the Circus Historical Society from 1974 to 1977, and

WHEREAS, Mr. Thayer devoted much of his life to the study of American circus history, and did more research on American circus history than any other individual, and

WHEREAS, Mr. Thayer published approximately 100 articles on circus history in *Bandwagon*, the Journal of the Circus Historical Society, from 1943 to 2009, and

WHEREAS, Mr. Thayer's *Annals of the American Circus 1793-1860*, is the nonpareil work on the history of the circus, and his *Traveling Showmen*, the finest single volume on American field show history, and

WHEREAS, Mr. Thayer set an unprecedented and unmatched standard of excellence in both the research and writing of circus history, and was always generous and gracious in sharing his vast knowledge and served as a mentor and critic to other circus historians, and

WHEREAS, Mr. Thayer was a gentleman of the old school, a scholar, a wit, a raconteur, a gourmet, a sports enthusiast, and an intellectual, but most of all an excellent husband and father, and a wonderful friend, and

WHEREAS, Mr. Thayer was unsurpassed in his devotion to the ideals of scholarship, and was the doyen of American Circus Historians,

NOW THEREFORE be it resolved by the Members and the Board of Trustees of the CIRCUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC. that they hereby extend their sincerest gratitude in memory of STUART LeROY THAYER for his many years of service to, and leadership of, the Society and for his unwavering dedication to preserving and disseminating the history of the circus and allied institutions in satisfaction of the Society's educational goals. We will not see his like again.

Done this 11th day of July 2009 at Milwaukee, WI at the annual meeting of the Members and Trustees of the Circus Historical Society.

MICKEY KING

By Steve Gossard

One day in June of 1918, two months shy of her thirteenth birthday, Marie Gertrude Comeau (she was called Mickey) stepped out onto the fire escape of the family apartment in St. Albans, Vermont. She had an uninterrupted view of the city, for they lived on the fifth floor of the building. Mickey leaned forward onto the wooden railing, and it fell away. She dropped straight to the ground. Incredibly, she survived, but she did not walk again until Armistice Day, November 11. This was not the last serious fall that Mickey would take, nor her only brush with death.

Mickey had been born on a farm in Sutton, Quebec in August of 1905. Her sisters, Antoinette and Rose, and her brothers, Joe and Ernest were all born at this same location. Years later, she would recall living a pioneer way of life on the farm in Canada. They ate venison from deer that her uncle had hunted in the woods. They butchered hogs and ate head cheese, blood sausage, boiled potatoes and baking soda biscuits with cream gravy. Once, as a toddler, when Mickey swallowed some fly-poison her mother made her drink cream as an antidote. Either there was no doctor available or they simply could not afford the treatment. The family moved across the border to Richmond, Vermont, then to Sheldon Springs, where her brother, Clarence was born. From there they moved to St. Albans, where Mickey took her near-fatal fall in 1918.



They butchered hogs and ate head cheese, blood sausage, boiled potatoes and baking soda biscuits with cream gravy. Once, as a toddler, when Mickey swallowed some fly-poison her mother made her drink cream as an antidote. Either there was no doctor available or they simply could not afford the treatment. The family moved across the border to Richmond, Vermont, then to Sheldon Springs, where her brother, Clarence was born. From there they moved to St. Albans, where Mickey took her near-fatal fall in 1918.

Mickey on Sells-Floto in 1927. Pfening Archives.

Following her accident Mickey

dropped behind in her school-work. She was often nervous, and her attention wandered. The fact that the family moved so often in those early years made matters worse. Eventually they settled in Holyoke, Massachusetts, where Mickey worked in the textile mills when she was not in school. She had little time for recreation, but she did enjoy reading poetry, and she always loved music. The family owned an old Edison phonograph and a few cylinders. The old recordings were simple songs, like Roll Me Over in the Clover, and The Black Eyed Susan. Mickey and her sisters and brothers would lay on their stomachs on the floor and listen to the music as her mother cranked up the phonograph.

In her teen years Mickey was unhappy, restless and dissatisfied with her life. On July 2, 1923, just one month before her eighteenth birthday, a casual encounter changed her life. Mickey and her friend Polly Bednarski stood outside the front door of the Sells-Floto Circus tent at Holyoke. The side show announcer was introducing the lion fighting Terrell Jacobs from the platform. With no notion of the etiquette of circus society, Mickey and

Mickey in iron jaw routine on Sells-Floto. Author's collection.

Polly followed Jacobs into the tent. When he realized that they were not with the show Jacobs told them that they should apply





for work. "They're looking for girls like you."

Another view of Mickey on Sells-Floto. Author's collection.

Mickey went home and forged a note from her mother to the management of the circus granting her permission to join the show. The next day she hitchhiked to meet up with the circus at Greenfield.

George Myers

hired her on as a bally girl (a chorus singer and dancer). When she began traveling with the circus that day Mickey had nothing but the clothes she was wearing when she had left the house. The women performers made her a dress from discarded bits of costume fabric.

The status of a circus bally girl was only slightly above that of a hired hand on the show, and Mickey began watching the performance, looking for something more ambitious to do. At the same time, it was obvious to everyone with the circus company that Mickey was a young girl on her own, and she needed supervision and protection.

One day between shows the big top was empty. The big trapeze rigging was left standing after the Flying Wards act had closed out the program. Mickey entered the tent and climbed the rope ladder to the pedestal board, where the trapeze "flyers" swung off to do their act. Eddie Ward, the owner of the Flying Wards' act, entered and found this attractive young girl swinging on the trapeze above the net. Mickey was, in fact, trespassing on Eddie's property. He was impressed with how strong she seemed, and with her apparent fearlessness. Ignoring her obvious breach of etiquette, Eddie hired Mickey into the Flying Wards act on the spot. No doubt Mickey would have preferred to begin as a star solo aerialist, like Erma Hubble, but every new recruit began training with the Flying Wards as a "catcher" with the flying return act, and Mickey was no exception. The catcher with a flying return act hangs by a trapeze head-downwards, and catches the "flyer" after the trick is done.

One evening at the close of the season the circus personnel were having a bonfire in the back lot. Mickey looked up to see a pair of dark eyes watching her. She had attracted the attention of Allen King, the big cat trainer on the show. Allen was a strong, rough sort, a very physical man, a hard drinker and a gambler. His act with the Sells-Floto Circus was called "The Cage of Fury." He worked thirty-two lions and tigers together in one cage, and he was the first man to introduce black leopards and mountain lions into this type of act. Allen began courting Mickey that year. She returned with the Wards to their winter quarters in Bloomington, Illinois at the close of the season, and continued her training.



Left to right Mickey, sister Antoinette and friend on Sells-Floto. Author's collection.

Eddie Ward was contracted to provide all of the aerial performances for the American Circus Corporation, of Peru, Indiana. His troupe practiced through the winter on his farm on the outskirts of Bloomington, Illinois. Eddie and his wife Mayme lived in the house with the girls in the act. The men performers and married couples lived a few blocks away in a series of small bungalows that Eddie owned on Colton Street. There was a barn on the property that had been adapted for training aerial performance. Mickey learned a number of circus skills during her tenure with the Ward troupe, such as the flying return act, solo trapeze work, Spanish web, Roman rings, horseback riding and wire walking. She was already becoming a versatile performer when she returned to the Sells Floto Circus with the Ward troupe in 1924.

Mickey and Allen King were married in 1924 while on the road with the Sells-Floto Circus. The following year she left the Wards and went with Allen with the Lee Brothers' Circus. Mickey and Allen separated the following year while they were working with the Sells-Floto Circus, and she

Allen King on Sells-Floto in 1924. Pfening Archives.





Mickey and Allen King on Sells-Floto in 1924. Author's collection.

returned to the Flying Wards. She remained married to Allen for six or seven years before getting a divorce. Mickey stayed with the Wards working on the Sells-Floto Circus until 1928.

Meanwhile, Eddie Ward had been watching a talented young man who had been breaking in on the trapeze at the YMCA, named Arthur Vasconcellos. Art joined the Flying Wards in 1926 and quickly became a standout performer. Not only would Art prove himself to be one of the greatest all-time performing athletes, but also a brilliant show manager in the years to come. Art would soon become an important person in Mickey's life.

In 1927 Mickey's sister Antoinette visited the Sells-Floto show when they were performing in Detroit, Michigan. Antoinette had been attending Saint Mary's Catholic school in Burlington, Vermont. She was unhappy, and she begged Mickey to get her a job with the circus. Eddie Ward did not need another woman with the troupe, but he agreed to take Antoinette in as a favor to Mickey. Eddie had no way of knowing that he was hiring a girl who would become the greatest woman trapeze artist in history.

The year 1929 was critical for the Flying Wards. Eddie Ward died early in the season from heart failure. At the end of the 1929 circus season most of the Ward troupe's best people left the act to strike out on their own. Art Vasconcello shortened his name to "Concello." He married Mickey's sister, Antoinette that year, and together they formed the Flying Concellos trapeze act. By 1937 Art and Antoinette were both performing "the big trick," a triple somersault to a

hand catch, with the act. This firmly established the Concellos as the greatest flying return act in the business.

Eddie Ward's death came as a blow to Mickey. She left the Ward troupe, taught herself to do the difficult and sensational feat called "one-arm swings," and set out on a career as a solo aerialist. Searching for an agent to handle her career was discouraging. The first agent she approached dismissed her out of hand. "I don't handle dumb acts!" he said. Acts which were primarily physical, without dialogue, were called "dumb acts" in the business. Someone suggested that she contact Jack Mandel, a booking agent in New York City. Jack took Mickey as his client, and worked as her agent for many years. Eddie Ward's wife, Mayme tried for several years to keep the Flying Ward troupe together, but eventually she gave up the act, and in 1935 she sold the practice barn to Art Concello.

The year 1929 was also a climactic year in American circus history. That year the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus bought the American Circus Corporation. Now the Ringling corporation owned not only the Greatest Show on Earth, but also the Sells Floto Circus, the Hagenbeck Wallace Circus, the John Robinson Circus, the Al G. Barnes Circus, and the Sparks Circus. Thus the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Corporation had a near monopoly over the circus business in America.

If the economy had remained healthy this purchase would have made John Ringling the most powerful man in show business. Unfortunately, the stock market crash in October of that year ruined Ringling and threw the nation into the Great Depression. The control of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus Corporation eventually fell into the hands of John Ringling's nephew, John Ringling North, and a new era of American circus history began. North later hired Art Concello as his General Manager. Art led "the big show" through the parts of the 1940s and 1950s.

Mickey performed with the Robbins Brothers' Circus in 1929 along with the Flying Concellos. On May 17, while performing on the Roman Rings at Centerville, Ohio, she fell while doing a shoot-out trick, a sensational stunt in which the aerialist swings forward, falls, and is caught by her hocks in the rings at the apex of her swing. Mickey somehow missed catching the rings, and fell thirty feet head-first to a hard wooden floor. Mickey suffered a severe concussion. Her head, shoulders and chest turned black and blue. There was no doctor available at Centerville, and they took her on the circus train to the next stop for treatment.

It is difficult to chronicle a detailed history of Mickey's career as a solo performer after 1929. Most of the information that we know comes from her reminiscences and her undated scrapbook clippings. After so much time had elapsed the incredible variety of events and sensations seemed to run together in her mind in a continuous flowing history. She would often relate some amazing anecdote that came to her in a flash, out of context, out of time. As good as her memory was—it was amazing—she could not recall exactly when many events took place. Her scrapbook clippings were not the most accurate source of information. Most of the articles were undated, and the press often distorted the facts for the sake of sensationalism and public



Antoinette Concello on Sells-Floto. Pfening Archives.

appeal. It was said, for example, that she began performing at age fourteen. Her age was often stated as being several years too young. When performing in Massachusetts she was described as a Massachusetts girl. In Buffalo she was a "Buffalo girl." In an article from the *Seattle Star* from about 1933 she was described as "a Palomar artist," who has "never been in the circus. But give her time. She's only 18." The devoutly Catholic Mickey was once described as a strict Methodist. One source stated that she was the daughter of a minister. It was said that she had performed the triple somersault with the Ringling show. All of this misleading rhetoric was unnecessary, of course. The truth was more sensational than fiction.

One true item that was quoted in many of her interviews was the fact that she had broken in under the direction of Eddie Ward with the great Flying Wards troupe. Mickey was obviously proud of this fact. Her sister Antoinette's accomplishments were also a source of great pride, and were often cited in the press. One article stated that Mickey was "not quite so blonde but much prettier than Sally Rand, Mae West or Kate Hepburn..." This was true, and Mickey

was certainly aware of her physical attractions. Her brief costumes were a sensation in the 1930s and 1940s. Yet she was modest, and inclined to emphasize her accomplishments more than her looks. She was quoted as saying, "I've always managed to keep feminine, but just feel these muscles if you wish—for your story."

Mickey toured the country on the vaudeville circuit, played Shrine Circus dates and occasionally performed for big traveling shows. In March, 1934, while driving through Ohio between engagements, she picked up a hitchhiker and carried him in her car for a few miles. She happened to be driving the same model and color automobile as Evelyn "Billie" Frechette, the mistress of the famous hoodlum, John Dillinger. Miss Frechette was in transit through Indiana at the same time, helping Dillinger escape after he had killed a police officer in Chicago. Mickey was mistaken for Evelyn, and was taken into custody by federal agents. She saw the humor in the situation and tried to joke with the government police, but they were deadly serious. She was held overnight, and finally released when a county sheriff corroborated her story.

Mickey fell again in Cincinnati in May of 1934 as a result of improper rigging. This time her whole trapeze apparatus fell to the floor on top of her. Recuperating in Niles, Michigan weeks later, a line of circus people trooped through her hospital room. She was barely conscious, but she could hear veteran performer Charlie Siegrist say, "Poor little Mickey, she ain't never gon'na work again." Mickey thought, "What? Never work again? I will! I will work again!" Her agent called a few days later to tell her that she was booked to work on stage in four weeks. When the time came, two big stage hands carried her out as the curtain rose. She climbed the web hand over hand, did a few one-arm swings, descended, and styled to a tremendous ovation from the audience. "And that's how I made my comeback," she recalled, years later. Yet this wasn't the last fall Mickey would take. Some years later she fell once again in Toronto while working with Ben Bernie's orchestra.

Working a Shrine date out west many years later, Mickey parked her trailer at a service station, and walked into town to a butcher's shop. After buying something for her dinner she engaged the butcher in conversation. "Are you going to the show?" she asked.

"Sure," he said. "I'm sponsoring a bunch of kids from the children's hospital." As an afterthought, he added, "But I haven't seen a circus in years. The last time I went I saw a little girl fall from the trapeze. It was awful. We never heard whether she lived or died."

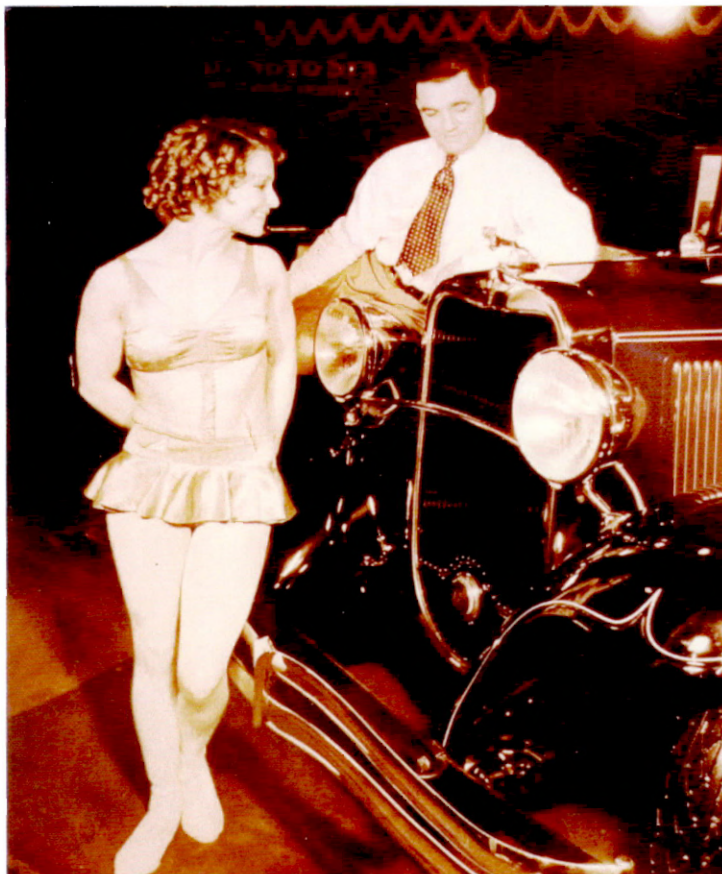
Mickey felt chills run through her. "Where was that? When?"

"Cincinnati, 1934."

Retelling this story always brought tears to her eyes. "I brought the fellow to the show with all the kids as my personal guests," Mickey said. "Front row seats."

Mickey's charm, showmanship and athletic talent were in demand in the 1930s. She was featured on the cover of *Billboard* on November 2, 1935. At one time she represented both Macy's and the Ford Motor Company. She later became the official "mascot" for the Chevrolet Motor Company.

Mickey had more than one specialty with her act. The



Mickey and Allen King in a Dodge auto advertisement. Author's collection.

late, great aerialist, Lillian Leitzel, had set the standard for aerial work in the 1920s. Every solo female aerialist in the 1930s wanted to break Leitzel's record of one-arm swings. This feat consisted of hanging from a loop by one wrist some 20 or 30 feet in the air, and pivoting on the shoulder, swinging the entire body over and over. Mickey's accomplished 276 one-arm swings during one performance for a crippled children's benefit in Springfield, Massachusetts. Ultimately, the record for one-arm swings went to Erma Hubble, however, who did 316 or 317 at one time. Besides the one-arm swings, Mickey, Erma Hubble, Ullaine Malloy and Lilian Leitzel were the only aerialists who performed a trick called the "one-arm plange." This trick began like the one-arm swings, but instead of swinging over and over the aerialist swung her arm behind her back. Mickey did seventeen of these in succession in one performance. A similar trick was called the "roll-up." This trick was done on the vertical rope instead of a loop. The aerialist swung up the rope hand over hand, rolling into a plange with each successive hand-hold. Mickey stated that she was the only performer who could do ascending and descending roll-ups on the web. Just short of five foot tall, under 100 pounds, she was cute and energetic. Her act always had class and style. Early in her career her musical accompaniment was a song called "Sweet Madness." Later she used "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," but discarded that song after the Hartford circus fire in 1944. After that she used "Twilight Time."

In 1942 she was featured on her husband's King Bros. Cir-

cus.

Once, when working for the George Hamid booking agency, a show manager knocked on Mickey's hotel room door. "Oh, Mickey," he said, "what am I going to do? I've booked a rigging and no act!" A beautiful young dancer named Ullaine Malloy had bought an aerial rigging with the intention of teaching herself to do an aerial act. She booked her act, but was afraid to go up. Mickey met Ullaine and taught her everything she knew. Ullaine was very flexible, and she became the foremost aerial contortionist of her time. She worked with Mickey on the Hamid-Morton Circus for a number of years.

During her stage career Mickey worked with some of the most popular vaudeville people in the business. She knew Jimmie Durante and Red Skelton personally, and played the Radio City Music Hall, the Roxy Theater, and many other major theaters around the country. She played Lou Walters's Latin Quarter in New York.

In the late 1930s she traveled overseas. She performed on the stage in England, France and Germany before the hostilities forced her to leave Europe and travel to Australia. There she appeared in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane and other large cities. Returning to the states in 1939 at the outset of World War II in Australia, she was delighted to discover that she had been chosen by a *Billboard* magazine poll as the best female solo aerialist in the business. She was awarded a certificate and a silver medal.

Mickey became a headliner with "Sally Rand's Gay Paree Review." Sally was already a legend in the business when Mickey joined her. She had caused a sensation at the Chicago World's Fair in 1933 as the original fan dancer. Mickey performed with Sally in Mexico City, and continued with the show at Treasure Island in San Francisco in 1940. At one point Sally told Mickey that she wanted to learn to do aerial work. Mickey was more than willing to teach her, but the work was too hard for Sally. The ropes burned her hands. She let the idea drop. Mickey continued to work through the war years doing shows for the troops.

Mickey lacing the big top on King Bros. Circus in 1942. Pfening Archives.



Mickey remained one of the most versatile and sought after performers in the business. Late in her career Mickey worked in Billy Ward's flyin-return act. Mickey had known Billy for many years. They had both been pupils of Eddie Ward in the 1920s. Billy called Mickey when one of his flyers was injured, and Mickey worked with him for at least one season. She developed a close relationship with Billy's catcher, Jimmy Olson. She and Jimmy traveled together, and he worked as her rigger for several years. She also substituted in an adagio act called "The Kitchen Pirates" at one time when the girl partner became ill.

Mickey performed stunts in a few movies. She took eighty-five foot dives wearing a black wig that fell to her ankles for the movie "Crime Without Passion;" worked in the Broadway play, "Jumbo;" and she flew from Florida to Hollywood several times to make a movie with Red Buttons and Jack Palance. Mickey was contracted to play the part of Lilian Leitzel in a movie about the great trapeze flyer, Alfredo Codona. Clayton Behee, another pupil of Eddie Ward, was slated to play the part of Alfredo. The movie never was produced. Reaching for the flybar during shooting one day, Mickey fractured a couple of bones in her hand. The producers could not replace her, and the production was dropped. Mickey managed a restaurant in Elkhart, Indiana while her hand was injured.

Mickey's last engagement was with the Fred J. Mack Circus in 1955, where she did her aerial act. After cook Tillie Keys left the show Mickey pitched in as a chef on the show.

When the show folded she worked for Bob Musselman, another protégé of Eddie Ward's, operating a duck pond game at a major amusement park.

I met Mickey in 1984 through our mutual friend, Lorraine Valentine. Mickey returned to Bloomington, Illinois often over the years to renew acquaintances, and for regular appointments with her dentist. At that time I was piecing together the story of Bloomington's circus history. Often when I asked Lorraine for information she would say, "I don't know, but you should ask Mickey. She'll know." Lorraine wasn't exaggerating. Mickey was a fountain of information.

In the 1980s Mickey was living in Niles, Michigan, but she still owned property in Sarasota, Florida. A short time later she married James McLeod, a



wild west performer, and widower of her old friend, Polly Bednarski. She settled in Peru, Indiana, former home of the American Circus Corporation, where so many of her old circus friends still resided. Jim McLeod died a few years later. Her ex-husband, Allen King died of unknown causes in 1952. Mickey died January 4, 2004 in Peru, Indiana, and was buried the Comeau family plot at Park Hill Cemetery, adjacent to that of the Ward family.

Mickey on the Fred J. Mack Circus in 1955. Pfening Archives.

In an interview with the *Detroit Free Press* of February 21, 1932 Mickey stated: "There is one thing I like better than any other. I like the people in the audience to like me. I want them to applaud and cheer me. I know when I please those who come to see me that I can be

with them for a long time, and that is a great thing for a performer to know.

"And besides that, it means money. After all, money is the thing that counts. Does it count more than applause? Well—I don't know. But if you can get applause, why, you can have money, too, and that's money and applause. And what's wrong with that. Eh?

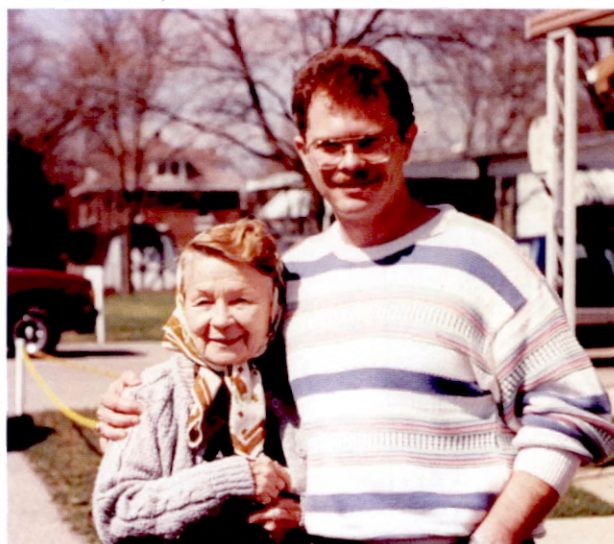
"I don't think I could stand it if the spectators behaved as if my act were a flop. It would be tough going up there and turning somersaults--more than 100 somersaults--while hanging by one wrist, and have people act as if they didn't like it or didn't care..."

Mickey King was a strong, brilliant, resourceful and courageous person. Though she was a part of an elite group of extremely motivated and gifted people, she retained a profound respect for the common, hardworking people of America all her life. Their entertainment was her life's work.

The following is from the June 1971 issue of *Yankee* magazine: *The Only Little Girl Who Ever Ran Away From Home To Join The Circus And Became A Big Star.* By George Emery

Mickey and the author on March 28, 1991. Author's collection.

"Dear Mr. Myers," the message read; "I consent for my daughter to work for you in your circus. Mrs. T. Comeau, Holyoke, Mass., July 2, 1923." That's all there was to it. One simple declarative sentence, but a sentence that was to be



Miss Mickey Comeau's passport, her open sesame to a life of spangled stardom. She had written the note, secretly, herself.

Mickey was born in Sutton, Quebec and christened Marie Gertrude, one of 9 children of Toussaint and Jane Comeau. The father was nicknamed "Mike," and before age 3, Marie was known as "Little Mike" or "Mickey."

"My father was a farmer--a 'cultivator' they called it in Canada," Mickey now says, "but he jogged around. We came across in 1910 and lived in Swanton, Richford and Shelburne Springs in Vermont. Oh, and Newport Farms. Then, he worked in the Van Camp milk plant in St. Albans and the candy factory in Burlington. Along about 1917 he heard of good-paying jobs in mills at Holyoke, so we moved there. We were a poor family; when I was old enough I worked in the mills too. Skinners, Farr Alpaca, Livingston Worsted. Mornings I'd go to continuation school--typing, sewing, music--and in the afternoons to work. I didn't like it. The work, I mean. It was all right, I guess, except it was not for me.

Mickey riding manage on Sells-Floto in 1927. Pfening Archives.



"But I had fun. My girl friends were Polly Bednarski, Mary Shea and Lillian Couture. We'd go to dances at Mountain Park together with swimming and rowing at Hampton Ponds. Good times. But the factories, I couldn't stand them." Then, on July 2, 1923, Sells-Floto came to Holyoke and Mickey, who had never seen a circus, found herself truant from work, on the show's midway just before the matinee. Mouth agape, she watched and listened while the side show barker pointed to a handsome young man standing beside him on the bally platform and shouted, "I call your attention, friends, to Capt. Terrell Jacobs, world's youngest and most fearless animal tamer." Jacobs hardly looked the part. He wore a faded red bandsman's jacket and unpresed gray trousers. But he did carry an impressive coiled black whip and a shiny 32-caliber revolver, one in either hand. "This daring young man," the barker went on, "is about to enter the den, the steel-bound arena, with Nero, that ferocious, untamed African lion direct from faraway jungles. He will

fight his way in, he will fight his way out, and remember, friends, no matter what happens, the steel bars are there for your protection. Are you ready, Capt.?" Jacobs saluted, left the platform and entered the side show tent. Mickey was right behind him.

If she was fascinated outside the tent, she was completely spellbound when Jacobs, following an introduction by another speiler ("the inside talker"), fired his pistol, broke into Nero's cage, cracked his whip a few times, chased the unwilling lion back and forth for a minute or so and then ducked out. The talker addressed the crowd, "I now direct your attention to this next platform and Miss Artoria, the tattooed lady. She will entertain you." The spectators moved on. All except Mickey. She stood transfixed. As he left the safety cage adjoining Nero's lair, Jacobs casually noticed the lone spectator, but he now turned his back, opened a trunk and proceeded to repair a rip in his trousers. Mickey was sure that Nero had clawed him; actually Cap had torn his pants on a cage door latch. Over his shoulder he asked, "How's the big show house?"

"He thought I was a girl visiting from the big show," Mickey now understands and when she made no reply, he turned for a second look. "You're not with it," he guessed, then added, "But you ought to be. They need ballet girls." "He wrote the name, 'George Myers,' the ballet director, on a scrap of paper, gave it to me, told me how to find him and went back to his sewing," Mickey recalls. Myers proved ready to provide employment: Mickey was just the sprightly, attractive girl the show could use. But her youth gave him pause (she was 17 and looked younger) and he insisted on a letter of parental consent. He said if she could get permission and would bring the evidence, she might join in Greenfield, 10 miles away, the show's next town. What else need she bring, she asked. "Plenty of soap and towels," Myers replied.

Mickey hurried home. She wrote the note, "I consent for my daughter...," packed a grip with towels and soap and hid it in the cellar coal bin, confiding her plans to no one. Next morning she slipped down to the cellar, retrieved the grip, left her house and started out on foot toward Greenfield. She never dreamed that through this escapade she was to become the first and only girl to run away from home to join the circus and "make it big" with circuses and in music halls and theaters in half a dozen countries on three continents. It was raining. Hard.

Eventually the Comeau family learned, somewhat with shock, of Mickey's whereabouts, but when they found her in apparently good hands and obviously content, there was a happy, even tearful, reunion. Her furtive letter-writing and clandestine leave-taking were both excused as more ingenious than deceitful. The family loved her still. "C'est bon," says Mickey now. Hitch-hiked rides brought Miss Comeau to the Greenfield show grounds ("the lot") by late afternoon.



Terrell Jacobs on Sells-Floto Circus. Pfening Archives.

Had her arrival been earlier, she might have found friend Jacobs a less glamorous personality than he had seemed the day before. Aside from exercising Nero a dozen times a day for side show patrons, he had the correlative chore of keeping exhibition premises neat and tidy. Mornings, with the tent empty of customers, he would invade Nero's den, not with whip and gun but with a bushel of shavings and an outsized kitchen broom. To sweep out! In his housekeeping, he often had to sweep a recumbent lion to one side and out of the way. On occasion, Nero balked; he was at an age where relaxation was preferable to enforced activity. The Cap would bring the broom into play, as something other than a cleaning tool. From Nero, and with a broom, Jacobs learned the fundamentals of wild animal training; he learned them well.

In time he would train a lion to ride horseback--so amenably, if not amicably, that his wife could "work" the act. He would be the first to teach a group of black leopards to perform. By 1938 he would be considered "the greatest subjugator of lions ever to appear in the Ringling Bros. steel arena." Circusey hyperbole, this last. But also, fact. It was in Bangor, Maine, however, on a steamy, muddy lot in early summer 1928 that Cap reached his finest hour. In full view of a horror-stricken audience he became the hero of circus history's most celebrated rescue of an animal trainer attacked by a savage beast. Mabel Stark was the victim; Terrell Jacobs saved her.

Jacobs and Miss Stark were traveling with the John Robinson circus, he with a cage full of lions and she with 8 tigers. It had rained for several days in Bangor prior to the show's arrival and the fairgrounds lot was a quagmire. During her act, Mabel slipped and fell, prone. Immediately her two most treacherous tigers pounced and set out literally to make a meal of her. Jacobs, standing by, burst into the arena, beat off the tigers and held them, cornered, until attendants could drag Miss Stark, bloody and barely breathing, from the cage. At the Bangor hospital, Dr. Harrison Robinson took charge of remedial surgery that lasted over four hours.

Miss Stark observed, later and reasonably, that Robinson was the "best doctor in Bangor." She had been unmercifully mauled. It is a tribute to Dr. Robinson's surgical skill that she recovered. It is a tribute to Terrell Jacobs' instinctive bravery that she was spared for surgery. "I let Cap get engaged to me at one time," Mickey confides. "He had been married, and the marriage broke up. He was down-in-the-mouth, at loose ends, and I knew how he felt. Besides, I liked him and, after all, he put me in show business."

But, for the following 6 months, Cap and Mickey seldom worked together or saw each other. The engagement was called off and Cap married someone else. The whole "romance" was an interlude 25 years removed from the rainy afternoon, July 3, 1923, when Mickey presented herself to George Myers and Sells-Floto, drenched

A studio photo by Maurice Seymour c-1940. Pfening Archives.



and bedraggled but "ready to work."

"Mr. Myers put his arm around me," Mickey says, "and introduced me to 'Mother Copeland.'"

Mrs. Copeland, wardrobe mistress and shepherdess of the unmarried showgirls, found some dry clothing and did what else she could to help acquaint the neophyte with a new and different world--the circus. It was different; that night three elephants stampeded. Whether the elephants had been unduly stimulated by the cooling rain or startled by some stray, scampering mouse has never been determined. In any event, 3 of the herd broke from their keepers at the show's loading point in the Boston and Maine yards at the foot of Bank Street.

Trunks and tails outstretched, the animals shuffled up Bank Row Hill at 15 miles an hour, turned east onto Main St., then through a passageway next to the Unitarian Church. They crashed slam-bang through a couple of wooden fences and finally halted in the open cellar of the nearby Washburn barn. The breathless keepers caught them there, adjusted shackles and returned the errant elephants to the cars. Mickey only learned of the ruckus the next day. "I didn't know what stampede meant, anyway. I didn't even know elephants could run!"

She learned, though, first hand, a few weeks later when again the elephants ran away--this time while marching in the show's opening spectacle, "A Night in Persia," in which Mickey also took part. She ran, too. "Yessiree bobtail, I ran. The other way." If there is one circus refuge from stampede confusion and bustle, it is the big top between shows--precious hours after the matinee and before doors open for the night show. Here performers habitually congregate to chat, read or just rest. Or to sharpen their skills by practice in the vacant rings.

Mickey joined the group one afternoon, climbed a web to an unoccupied trapeze and began to swing. She had hardly stirred up a breeze when a thick-set, heavy-shouldered man came into the tent, saw the swinging stranger and ordered her to come down. "Right quick." The man was Eddie Ward, owner, trainer and principal catcher of the "16 Flying Wards."

It was on his rigging that Mickey was an unwitting trespasser. Confronted on the ground by Eddie, she found him more amused than irritated by her aerial exploits and in conversation, it developed that she liked to swing, had good muscle and was unafraid of height. Ed thought, he said, the Flying Wards might take her into the troupe, "if you'd like it." If she'd like it? Oh brother, would she! Her career was underway.

"Mr. Ward was the greatest catcher of flyers there ever was, now, then or anytime," Mickey declares. "He was stern and, by cracky, you did what he said to do. But he was great. And he was a wonderful man. He loved his wife and children. Did everything for them. He was like a father to me." She glows--still--to recall Ward once having said to her, "Mickey, you're a good girl." Jimmie Thistle, a young clown tumbler from East Boston, commented about Eddie, in different vein, after he had spent the 1928 season on the Floto show in association with Ward. "Eddie Ward!" exclaimed the

Allen King



Allen E. King was born in Atlanta, Georgia on November 20, 1898. At age 13 he joined the I. W. Swain Dramatic Company, a wagon show. He developed into a proficient painter of backdrops, scenery and wagons.

He joined the Wortham Carnival where he cleaned animal cages. The young southerner had unusual talent and a remarkable understanding in handling beasts of the jungle. King joined the Al G. Barnes Circus in 1922, working under Louis Roth, head trainer on the Barnes show.

In 1924 he joined the Sells-Floto Circus where he presented lions and Polar bears. It was here that King met Marie Gertrude "Mickey" Comeau. During the season they were married in Paterson, New Jersey. In 1925 King was with the Lee Bros. Circus, working lions.

He was back with Sells-Floto in 1926 working a Polar bear act. In 1934 he worked a large mixed act in the Standard Oil Company's Live Power show at the world's fair in Chicago. King presented a mixed cat act on Cole Bros. in 1935. He left the show in mid-season and joined Ray Marsh Bryden's Rice Bros. truck show. While the Cole show acts and animals were playing the Detroit Shrine King made a connection with the Ford Motor Company that led to his joining Ford as chief of police at the Ford factory. He remained in that position until 1941.

King toured his King Bros. truck circus in 1942. Mickey King presented her aerial act on that show. He later had various jobs on Mills Bros., Rogers Bros. and C. R. Montgomery circuses. Allen King died on September 15, 1951 in Chicago.

incredulous Thistle; "Ward, why, that guy plays like Jack Dempsey fights." The 1924 Sells Floto season was memorable for the 2 major events in Mickey's life. She became a catcher, all 98 pounds of her, with the Flying Wards. "Mr. Ward felt it would help strengthen my arms and stomach muscles." And she fell in love with Allen King, a lion and polar bear trainer newly arrived on the show.

They were married in Patterson, New Jersey, between shows, in a civil ceremony. "I cried all through it," Mickey

says. The marriage endured 6 years. Allen had a compulsion, an addiction, for games with dice or cards, at which normally innocent pastimes he was chronically unlucky--so altogether unlucky that by a season's end the Kings would find themselves with no winter nest egg or, like as not, with debts. Mrs. King, thrifty then as now, considered this intolerable. And disappointing. Dreams of a "vine-covered cottage" vanished while only dreams. She pleaded and remonstrated. But to no end. Eventually, there was a separation; finally divorce. Mickey King was on her own. This time as a one-arm swing girl. Prior to his death in 1929, Eddie Ward taught half a dozen of his girl flyers to "roll up" a web and do one-arm swings. Mickey excelled. Roll-ups involve a series of one-arm back planges, the body held horizontally on a 2" cotton rope. As the performer reaches upward for the rope, first with her right then with her left hand, she literally rolls her body up the rope. Mickey once did 17 consecutive planges while rolling up a rope and thinks this may be the most that anyone ever did. "Anyway, it was easier for me than going up hand over hand." The one-arm swing is a more grueling exercise. The performer hangs by one hand from a swiveled loop, then throws her body over her own shoulder in continuous arcs. The body is like a single revolving vane on a Dutch windmill; the shoulder socket serves as what would be the blade's point of attachment to the axle of the windmill. Extraordinary strength is requisite. Mickey did 276 continuous one-arm swings in Springfield, Massachusetts, with Bob Morton's Shrine Circus on May 6, 1936, at a special morning show for orphans and underprivileged children, a record number which may never be exceeded.

A studio photo by Maurice Seymour c-1940. Pfening Archives.

Mickey felt good at the time and wanted to thrill the kids. "Hey, come on down," the rigging man who has holding her web kept yelling, "My hands are getting tired." Mickey was tired, herself, when she did come down. But happy. The kids went wild. It has been said that one-arm swing girls, other than Ward's, were often jealous because "Mickey could do so much more;" but she never sensed it. Neither has she felt it incumbent to vie with others. She was the queen. "I once played a big outdoor circus at the Narragansett race track in Rhode Island and Lalage was there too, doing one-arm swings. That was no way for a show to be framed, with two of us swinging together. Made it look like we were a dime a dozen. Anyway, I did more than Lalage and knew it, so I told her we'd cue the music to her act and when the drums rolled or the music stopped, I'd change what I was doing so we'd finish together. She's a lovely person, Lalage."

When, a while ago, Mickey learned she had been called a "proud performer" she hesitated, then said, "Well, I guess I was. I tried to do my best. Always. I'd concentrate. I lived for my act. And when I became a flyer for Mr. Ward, after I

had been catching, I'd dream about how to do certain tricks. With my own act, I lived it, practiced it all the time. Even when I wasn't working." Her act was often billed as "unsurpassed in grace and skill." Supremacy achieved through dedication. She took her act to England, Scotland and France in 1934; she toured Australia five years later. She played two seasons in Mexico, two in Canada. She crisscrossed the U. S. two dozen times; her Broadway dates included the Roxy, Radio City, and Loew's State. In 1942-43, she toured army camps with a Special Services show and along the way was made an honorary sergeant, afterwards lieutenant-sergeant in the army's recruiting service. She has a special citation from the U.S. Marine Corps, signed by General Chas. Price, "in appreciation for entertainment provided U.S. Marines in training" at Camp Pendleton. The General might well have added, "and for showing them what they're fighting for." It was about this time that Mickey was pioneering the "nude look" for lady aerial gymnasts; to the casual observer her costumes consisted simply of a few carefully placed spangles. She was, and is, a pretty, blue-eyed redhead, 4 ft. 11 1/2" barefoot, with a figure obviously feminine. She had her one near-fatal accident at the 1934 Cincinnati Shrine Circus; a rigger failed to properly adjust the shackle of her one-arm swivel loop and she fell 40 feet. She was lucky to have lived. Her right shoulder was crushed and took five months to mend. When she opened, after the accident, at Loew's Orpheum in Boston, she had

strength for her rope and ring routine but for only eight one-arm swings. "We want you if you just do five," the theater manager told her. "C'est bon," said Mickey!

She quit performing in 1968 when, in a sentimental farewell gesture, she did 63 swings at a show in Florida. But she has kept her rigging handy for a few roll-ups now and then, just to "keep in shape." Her 60 pounds of scrapbooks contain sincere encomiums from a wide-spread public press and complimentary professional reviews from the theatrical weeklies. Her most cherished notice is the cabled dispatch from *Bill-*

board's London correspondent to his editor in New York following her first performance at the Palladium. She is it memorized: "Mickey King Closes Show And Holds Her Public Until The King."

The translation: At the conclusion of each Palladium show it was customary for the audience to rise and remain standing while the British national anthem was played. It was also customary for most people in the audience to leave their seats after the next-to-closing act, generally the feature of the bill, by Chevalier or Durante; comparatively few patrons would be left in the auditorium for the final act and "God Save the King." Thus, when the London audience remained for Miss Mickey's aerial performance and the subsequent anthem, it was not only paying homage to the King but was also honoring the artistry of a foreign queen. A bespangled Yankee queen!



The Flying Cavarettas: Work, Love and Family

By Robert Sugarman

This paper was presented at the 2008 Circus Historical Society convention.

Traditional circus families live outside of the mainstream of society. Their isolation leads to much intermarriage. The Zoppe, the Wallenda, the Cristiani, the Canestrelli and other families are filled with performers who are related to each other. Only with the recent advent of circus schools has being born into a circus family become less important if one wishes to join the profession. Perhaps because the Flying Cavarettas only lasted one generation, they were more attuned to the world beyond the circus than the acts of more traditional families. Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Vice President for Production and Talent Tim Hoist wrote, "in the circus ring there is no beginning and no end; performers step into it and out of it as their lives evolve."¹ That is the perspective of a show that hires acts for a two year tour and then, in most cases, lets them go. As with athletic teams or ballet companies, the focus is on youth and there is a constant turnover in personnel. The Cavarettas found a more stable and longer lasting way to maintain their circus careers. Again, the lack of a next generation to take over may have been a factor.

The Cavarettas' interest in circus developed when their father, a cement mason, moved his family from Buffalo to St. Petersburg, Florida, in search of work. It was there that five year old Terry Cavaretta joined her eleven year old older

The Flying Cavarettas in Las Vegas.



The Flying Cavarettas in 1980.

sister Kandy in a circus program that had been started at the St. Petersburg Recreation Center by Faye Moser who had developed her skills in the Flying High Circus at Florida State University. Terry recalls that Kandy, "was getting a lot of attention and I got a little jealous because I wanted to learn, too. I was only five and scared half to death, but I did it."² Terry says she "used to go to a school that was one block from the circus school. After school I'd walk over to the Recreation Center. All the trapeze rigging was outside. We would practice till about five and then we'd go to dancing school. We'd go back to practice at night for the flying acts."³

She and Kandy were spotted by veteran flyer Fay Alexander--the man who did the flying in the movie Trapeze--who invited them to join the Flying Alexanders for spot circus dates. As the bookings would not keep them away from home for more than a month at a time, the girls became honorary Alexanders. Terry says, "I idolized Fay. He was a lot

The Cavarettas in a passing leap.





The Flying Alexanders in 1961. Left to right, Paul McCausland, Kandy Cavaretta, Terry Cavaretta, Rose and Fay Alexander.

like my father. The same build, the same sense of humor; he was like a surrogate father. If it wasn't for Fay, I don't think I would have done the triple. When I was flying, I would try to visualize the way he swung his weight and force it out and his whole swing. I tried to copy it. When I was interviewed when we were on the road and they asked 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' I would say, 'I want to be a trapeze artist and I want to do a triple.' I didn't know I would stay with it so long and actually live up to my words. Then I thought, 'Oh my God, I have to do it now. Because of Fay.' I wanted to be like him. He and his wife Rosie were really nice to us."⁴

Al Dobritch, who produced the circuses they appeared in with the Alexanders, put Terry and Kandy into what ever flying acts he booked. They worked with the Hartzell and Zacchini flying acts, but spent most time, about two years, with the Alexanders. Meanwhile, the girls focused on putting together their own act. "We wanted to be together, Dad and Mom wanted us all together so dad quit his job."⁵

The other siblings, twins Moe and Mollie and brother Jimmy, had been developing circus skills, but had done no flying. The twins did single trapeze and web and Jimmy sometimes did a double trapeze act with Terry. Dobritch suggested that they put together their own act rather than work for others. A contract was signed and they had just three months "to teach Moe and Mollie how to fly and Jimmy how to catch."⁶ As Terry has written. "We also needed to make costumes and get a rigging. I was only twelve, Moe and Mollie were fourteen, Jimmy was sixteen, and Kandy was eighteen. We didn't know it at the time, but a lot of performers were betting against us. Here we were, a bunch of

kids not from the business trying to put together a flying act in such a short time. It was unheard of. No one thought we could do it and we weren't so sure ourselves."⁷

They practiced in the morning at the Zacchinis' compound in Tampa. After going home for lunch, they practiced on an entirely different rigging owned by the Gaona family. In addition to sore muscles and blistered hands, Mollie was afraid of heights. Terry writes, "Moe dreaded practices so much that she used to pray for rain everyday. I remember looking across at my brother sitting on the catch trap and thinking, 'He's just too small to catch us.' I was used to seeing bigger guys over there, but he did great and never complained even though his legs were raw and bleeding. It was extremely difficult for all of us."⁸

Unlike the Pages children who moved into an established act over years, three of the Cavarattas were learning the basic flying skills in three months as they built the act. Terry believes that the work brought them closer together. "On the ground," she writes, "we may have had our normal sibling disagreements, but once we were up in the air, all was forgotten. You had to because you depended on each other with your lives."⁹

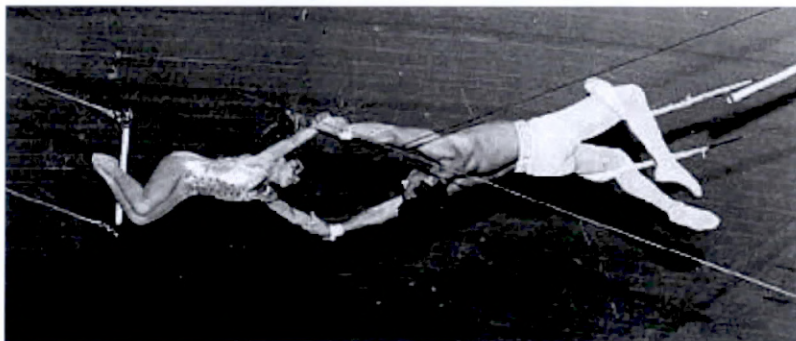
During what spare time they had, the girls and their mother sewed the costumes their mother designed while Jimmy and his father worked at developing a rigging. They finally bought the Gaona rigging they had practiced on, but the first day they put it up, it fell down. Terry remembers, "That was really scary."¹⁰

They did get the act together for their first date in Toledo, Ohio in 1966. Tricks included a one and a half somersault by Kandy and a passing leap. Terry says, "It wasn't the hardest act, but we had something that was unique. We were the first teenage flying act and the first flying act where all of the flyers were girls."

"We choreographed all of our styles to music which added to the uniqueness. Our mom's costumes weren't the traditional capes, but looked like floor length evening gowns. They were white satin with boat necked collars. We wore white gloves with the gowns. Jimmy wore a Prince Valiant type jacket which suited him perfectly because of his long hair."¹¹

The Flying Cavarettas arrived in the entertainment world in the 1960's. They had been preceded in the 1950's by television shows that featured the traditional, post-war family. Father Knows Best ran from 1954 to 1960. Other patrocetric shows of the time included The Adventures of Ozzie and

Eight year old Terry Cavaretta performing a "heels off" with the Flying Alexanders.



Harriet in which Bandleader Ozzie Nelson and his vocalist wife, Harriet Hilliard, and their sons Ricky and David, became television favorites playing a version of themselves from 1952 to 1966. The tone of the show had been established when it began on radio with professional actors playing the children in 1944. The real children joined the show in 1949. Another bandleader, Desi Arnaz and his actress wife, Lucille Ball, became the Ricardos on *I Love Lucy* that ran from 1951 to 1957. Its humor was built around Lucy's efforts to assert herself in a male dominated world.

The Cavarettas in the 1966 Al Dobritch Toledo, Ohio Shrine show.

In the sixties with its growing focus on youth culture, fathers stopped dominating the action. The Cowsill Brothers performed music made popular by the Beatles. When their family joined them and they began to write original music, the Cowsill Family became a popular touring musical group. Fascinated by the phenomenon, television producers put together a program based on the Cowsills and hired actress Shirley Jones to play the mother. The Cowsill children refused to participate without their mother, so The Partridge Family was formed. It consisted of Jones, her stepson, and a group of young actors who proved to be non-singers. However, since it was television the children could be dubbed and an artificial, and soon to be very popular, television show was launched.

The Flying Cavarettas fit in with the new focus on teen culture. This was the time of *American Bandstand* and the emergence of Rock and Roll as youth music. Terry recalls, "A guy named Charles Lawford who published two teen magazines, *Fave* and *Tiger Beat*, wanted to make us that kind of group. Everything was going well. They took pictures and we took singing lessons, but they didn't care if we could sing."¹² As with the Partridge Family, they could always be dubbed. "But," Terry goes on, "my mom committed suicide and so they dropped us because they wanted us to be the typical" read 'idealized' American family. But we were on the cover of *Fave*."¹³

After making their debut, the Cavarettas continued to develop their act. At 13 Terry started catching the triple somersaults she modeled after those done by Fay Alexander. For ten years she was listed in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the first woman to consistently perform the triple. The act eventually concluded with a "three part passing leap on which Kandy would do a one and a half across. Then I would go over her with a shoot over, change to legs in my brother's hands, after which Moe would go over me with a shoot over. Then we'd return to the board together. Jimmy would

follow us to the board with a straight jump. We would take our final bow before doing our dismounts."¹⁴

The longevity of the act is remarkable. It adapted to marriages, the birth of children. Even to death. Through it all, the act provided sustenance and continuity for the family. Soon after the death of their mother and their appearance on the magazine cover in October, 1968, the Cavarettas were booked into Circus Circus, a new Las Vegas Casino that

boasted the largest permanent Big Top in the world. In the itinerant world of circus, Circus Circus offered the troupe employment in one place.

When they started at Circus Circus, Kandy, the oldest, "was the head of the act," Terry recalls. "Then she left because she was getting married and going to live in California. That left Moe as head of the act. Then she got married and Mollie was the head of the act until she went to study dancing in California so I didn't really have a choice. It was OK. I'm head of the act."¹⁵

As head of the act, Terry called the tricks and set the bar and was in charge of training newcomers. But all major decisions, such as bookings, were made mutually.

As a result of the changes, the act shifted from four girl flyers to three. "All my sisters had to leave at one time or another because they got married and had kids."¹⁶ A fifth sister, Judy, who had married and missed her siblings' involvement with circus training and was not considered athletic, joined the act after she and her husband moved to Las Vegas to join the family after being stationed in Taiwan. Terry remembers, "I needed a girl to fly and I said, 'Judy, would you like to fly?' She said, 'Sure,' because she didn't really like her job. She learned to fly on her lunch breaks. Judy worked a couple years and did excellently."¹⁷

When Terry married Ron Lemus, a flyer, in 1972, the act split in two. The new act with Terry, her husband and her sister Judy was The Flying Terrels. "Ter" for Terry, "el" from Ron's middle name "Elroy." The other girl in the act was Eva Dunleavy who had walked by one day when they were rehearsing and asked to learn to fly. Jimmy and his wife, Judy, and Moe, who had married flyer Barry Mitchell, toured with Ringling as The Flying Medallions.

Both as the Flying Terrels and as The Flying Cavarettas, the act played abroad. One of their dates was at the Crique d'hiver in Paris. Terry recalls, "That beautiful building where they shot Trapeze. I had no idea how different it was to work in a European show. Circus is more respected; you're received better by the audience. We got standing ovations in London and in Copenhagen doing the same act we've always done. They just liked us better."¹⁸ When the Flying Cavarettas were in Copenhagen, they had five chances to film their act for television in a show where the



guest Ringmaster was dancer Gene Kelly. "I missed the triple every single show and the last show the announcer announced the triple twice and I missed and my hands were bloody. We had been practicing between shows and I was having trouble and getting really down about it. My brother said we were going to do another one. He is always gung-ho and I did another and we caught it. I swear God caught it because it was just finger tips. The audience stood up and then they were pounding their feet on the grandstand. It was thunderous. I was happy I got it, but mad at myself that it took me so long to do it. Then we did the passing leap and everything was fine. It was something I'll always remember because it was one of those times where, 'God, just please let me get this.'"¹⁹

The Flying Terrels were invited to participate in the Circus World Championships in London in 1977, when, after five years of marriage, Terry's husband died. Jimmy, whose Ringling tour had ended, rejoined he act. The reconstituted Flying Cavarettas which was billed as the Flying Terrels because that is how they had been publicized, won the championship and the act was presented to the Queen as part of the celebration of her twenty-fifth jubilee. When they returned to Circus Circus, the act was again The Flying Cavarettas.

During the run in Las Vegas, Terry, who always wanted to be thinner than she was, started her days five times a week at a fitness center. She then would do housework. The troupe would go to Circus Circus an hour before show time to stretch and Terry would kick her legs back and forth and hang from the water pipes. After fifteen minutes of warm up, she would rosin the bar and then go back to the dressing room to get ready. They usually had three shows a day. "We were so blessed. We were able to have a regular home life and were able to go to special engagements like the Championships and Christmas shows."²⁰ They appeared at the Monte Carlo Circus Festival in 1984 and won a Silver Clown which was presented to them by Cary Grant. However, when the offers to travel came, Terry was reluctant to go. "I'd say, 'but I like it here.' I was very comfortable at Circus-Circus because the rigging was stationery. We didn't have to travel. We didn't have to worry about the rigging being bouncy in different surroundings. On the road, going to different places, every time you set up the rigging it feels a little different and it takes a while to get used to it."²¹

The Flying Cavarettas retired in 1991. During the last year, Terry had trouble with the triple. "I think it was God's way of going. 'If it's going like this, you won't miss it so much.'"²² Jimmy and Terry revamped the double trapeze act they had done as children and performed it for four years at the Tropicana Hotel. "It was very enjoyable to perform and a great way to end our career."²³

Terry had met juggler ReJean St. Gules when they were both performing in Montreal in 1981 and they were married in 1983. At 47, Terry became a mother for the first time. Her son Sebastian, now six, keeps her busy as a soccer mom and

she helps out at her son's school. At five, Sebastian started emulating his father's juggling and last December Sebastian made his professional debut.

Looking back Terry is convinced the act benefited the family over the years. "When we came to Las Vegas, my mom had just died, I was fifteen and my dad wasn't doing too well. My brother and sisters working together kept us close and doing our school work. I think it would have been really difficult if we didn't have the act. We could have got into trouble, but we couldn't do drugs because we were working. The flying act was instrumental in keeping us straight and keeping us close. My husband and I moved to Hawaii last summer to try something and I missed my family so much, we came back."²⁴



Receiving the Monte Carlo Silver Clown award from Cary Grant in 1984.

At least in part, the continued success of the troupe resulted from the long stay in Las Vegas. Unlike other performers, they didn't have to live on the road in trailers or RVs, but had homes and stability. This may explain why, unlike so many other teenage sensations, the Flying Cavarettas continued to prosper as adults. The story of the Flying Cavarettas provides insight into the relationship of work to play, the meaning of family over a long span of time, the impact of a healthy life, and the importance of stable employment in the arts.

Notes

1. Tim Holst, "West Meets East: The Western Impact on Traditional Chinese Circus," *The Many Worlds of Circus* ed. Robert Sugarman. (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), p.101.
2. "The Flying Cavarettas, as Told by Terry Cavaratta St. Jules," Circus4Youth website, July 12, 2007.
3. "Phone interview with Terry Cavaratta St. Giles by the author, October 24, 2007.
4. Phone interview.
5. Phone interview.
6. Circus4Youth.
7. Circus4Youth.
8. Circus4Youth.
9. Circus4Youth.
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21. Phone interview.
22. Phone interview.
23. Circus4Youth.
24. Phone interview.

Ekaterina Brazarova

Interviewed by Arsen Baziants

Ekaterina Bazarova is an acclaimed circus artist in her homeland Russia, a recipient of the "Golden Elephant," the top prize of the Moscow International Circus Festival of Circus Arts; formerly a principal artist of the Russian State Circus; America's Chimera Circus; and is currently a principal acrobatic character in Zumanity, a permanent Las Vegas production of the Cirque du Soleil.

How did you start your career in circus arts?

My mother and step-father were in the circus arts industry. I had great interest in circus as a child because my mother was a performer and as early as a three-month old child I grew up in circus, playing with baby tigers and lions, bears, horses. I was like Mowgli in the Jungle Book! I traveled with my parents all across Russian with the State Circus. When I was five, my mother performed acrobatic stunts in numbers such as the Russian bar, flying

A recent photo of Ekaterina Brazarova out of costume.



trapeze, trampoline, and others. She was offered a contract to perform in Germany's Circus Althoff. I was five years old at the time. I remember traveling in circus trailers when I was about as tall as a trailer tire.

My dream was to become a piano player, but my mother persuaded me to practice acrobatics. At age of five or six she began training me to perform in

a hand-to-hand acrobatic duo. My mother was strict. When it came time to critique, she did not speak to me as her child. She treated me as an adult and criticized me accordingly. She used to say: "You're still a child and are not getting any pay for your performance, but we are working with you as an adult performer."

My step-father was even stricter. He would force me to do push-ups and sit ups much like in boot camp training. I remember he would make me to do press-ups. He would empty a match box and for every press-up he would put a match back in the box, until all matches were back in the box. My legs were not supposed to touch the floor, but when they did, he would empty the matches and I had to start all over again. This was torture!

At age 11 I had my first performance as a member of the Russian State Circus in Minsk, Belarus. I was extremely afraid, to be honest, before each performance. I performed in a banquine act with my step-dad. [The banquine act is essentially a sports acrobatics duo which involves tossing a partner high up, with daring jumps, landing on only the joined hands of the tossing partner (porter).] The acrobatic tricks were very complex, and each time I had to be prepared to give a flawless performance. Yet I was thrilled to perform in public and to be in the spotlight.

What the types of acts do you now perform?

I performed hand-to-hand in an acrobatic duo. I also performed equilibrium and contortion in the water bowl act of Zumanity. The water bowl is a beautiful act in which the audience observes my partner and me gliding through the water in a transparent glass, the walls of which look like a giant bowl. We strike an array of acrobatic and contortion poses. I am also trained to perform aerial gymnastics.

How do you practice?

I come to work at least one hour before the show starts. I warm



Ekaterina as Alice on Circus Chimera.

up a lot, do hand-stands on both and each hand separately. I practice with my partner, Valera [Valsriy Simonenko]. After my two days off (Monday and Thursday) Valera and I start the practice early, as we have to do a complete run through of the number. I also do various hand stands on the floor in practice for the water bowl act. Three times a week I lift free weights to keep my body strong, but I always have to balance extreme flexibility with strength. Both are very important in what I do.

I really enjoy practicing and performing in the water bowl act. The water is very warm, which helps to keep my body warm (I get frequently asked by my fans if the water is cold!) We use nose plugs, which allows me to comfortably perform under water.

How do you like living in Vegas?

I love it! It's not too small, not too big, open 24/7, and I see a great variety of people living in this city. This is also, of course, the Entertainment Capital of the World, and so, we see many talented artists here, which is great, because it creates a sense of competition and I always strive to be the best in what I do. This is an active city and things are always moving here. I have been to many cities and countries all over the world, and there's definitely no place like Las Vegas.

A publicity photo from Zumanity.

I don't think I will ever grow tired of it. Getting used to the climate took some time—it's really dry and hot here in the summer, but a four-hour drive takes you to the California beaches, so it's not too bad. For a circus artist, Vegas is the place to be to grow professionally. I am really happy that my professional career brought me to Las Vegas where I perform as a principal artist in a Cirque du Soleil production.

Do you interact with the big circus community in Vegas?

Of course! We are like a big family. I have friends in every Cirque du Soleil show here. We participate in various social events, parties, birthday parties, New Year's celebrations, and anniversary parties for various productions (for example, 5000 shows for "O" at the Bellagio, or five years of Zumanity). Periodically, about once a month, we hold competitions between all Cirque du Soleil artists—nothing serious, just for fun, although this being Las Vegas, we had to have a prize of \$500 for the winner! Recently we had a hand-balancing competition among Cirque du Soleil acrobats. I didn't participate, because I didn't receive notice prior to the competition and happened to be wearing a skirt at that moment! Haha!

What do you think is the differences between audiences in Rus-

sia and here in the U.S.

I don't think there is much difference. When people love circus, they get excited and give standing ovations here in the U. S. the same way as they do in Russia. In Russia it is typical for some spectators to step in the ring upon completion of the act and present a bouquet of flowers, toys, chocolates, etc. I never saw spectators do that in the U.S.

Do you think audiences in Russia are more knowledgeable about what you do than in the United States?

No, I think an average member of an audience in Russia is about as knowledgeable about the circus arts or any specific acrobatic performance as an average member of an American audience.

Are there differences in treatment of performers here and Russia?

I think artists get better treatment in the U.S. We get medical check-ups to ensure we are physically fit to continue performing. We get medical insurance. In Russia injured artists would get a paid leave of absence, but they would be out on their own in find-

ing the right health treatment. But generally, the difference is not so much between American or Russian circus employers, as it is between the traditional circus and a Cirque du Soleil type production. In Russian State Circus and in Circus Chimera artists present their numbers at audition or send video tapes, and if offered a contract, perform their act with little or no pressure to modify the act. In America we get a lot more care and attention from Cirque du Soleil. For example, the company offers free massage sessions to artists twice a week, English classes, etc. The costumes and make-up are always provided to the artists, whereas in Russia I had to purchase my own. In Russia, if performers had problems with their partners, they would work it out between themselves. The artistic director does not usually get involved,

which, frankly, I like. Here, we are expected to talk to the artistic director first. Having said that, I must say my partner Valera is really great!

Do you have any input on Cirque du Soleil's music in your act?

We have live music during each performance and it is, of course, wonderful. The orchestra concentrates on and tries to follow my movements. The music helps me to stay in the role of my character. The music, the makeup, the costume—all fit and follow the story of my character and the theme of the performance—everything inspires me and I express myself to the fullest for my audience. I really don't have any input into the music, but I do



think the music fits greatly with what I do. Even if I had control over what music is played during the hand-to-hand performance, I wouldn't change a thing; although I would change the costume. I do have a say over what tricks I perform at the creation of the act, but once the act is created, any changes have to be discussed with the artistic director, who usually listens to my opinion after he sees a rehearsal with the proposed change. The artistic director also has to coordinate with the musicians, especially if the change results in a slightly shorter or longer performance time.

What is the length of your act and the choice and order of tricks you perform?

I perform the hand-to-hand act with my partner, Valeriy Simonenko, originally from Krasnodar, Russia, a four-time sports acrobatics world champion, who formerly performed in *Mystere* and *Varekai* productions of Cirque du Soleil. The act starts with me drinking from a glass, then giving a cherry to my partner Valeriy. Then the MC picks up the glass. Standing on a single leg, I do a back walkover (i.e., fold backwards into a bridge position, kick one leg up and allow the other leg to follow, continue to bring the legs forward to land the back walkover, one landing before the other), we stand up, and I do a side split. I roll out of Valeriy and then go to him. He brings me up supporting me with one arm on my hip. Valeriy catches me and swings me behind him so that I can roll from his back to the sitting position on his shoulder. He walks with me on his shoulder and I do a cart-wheel down. We stand back to back; then I walk away and Valeriy follows me. We get to the position and I lean forward in a split with support on one foot against Valeriy's foot. I slide to the edge of the stage. Valeriy rolls me then puts me over his shoulder and we get to the position for the plunge when he balances on his arms and I hug him and lean forward. We get up and Valeriy spins me around his body. I go to the edge of the stage and fall backward. Valeriy catches me on the neck and we do a few steps back. Valeriy spins me and puts me on the stage. I push him on his chest and then do a front walkover. Valeriy catches my foot and lifts me straight up, as I stand in his palms. I shift my weight to one foot and do an arabesque. Valeriy brings me down to his chest and we roll on the stage over one another. Then I do a "needle" pirouette, lie on his shoulders, and do a back walkover. We stay face to face and Valeriy lifts me up in a hand stand. I do a side-split. He turns with me and I drop down. Valeriy rolls down and I do a back walkover over him. I lean out over the stage and he pulls me and tosses me in a fly-spin. He brings me upside down behind his neck and I slide around him in a split on the floor. I jump up with half turn in the air and land on Valeriy's hands in a middle split. Valeriy puts me on the floor and then pulls me to jump to him. Valeriy turns holding me, lifts me by my hips

and I arch backwards, holding my legs parallel to the floor. I do a one arm handstand on Valeriy's forehead. This completes the hand-to-hand act.

The water bowl, like the hand-to-hand acrobatic duo, lasts about five or six minutes. Two artists perform the act, and I work with a different partner at different times--either Ulziibayar or Ariuna, both from Mongolia where many contortionists come from. We start by diving into the glass bowl and swimming around the bowl's sidewalls. I then do a press up to a handstand on the edge of the glass bowl. My partner and I come face-to-face as she positions herself with her back on the platform between my hands. Next we do a synchronal combination: we both do handstands

with side split position and move to "flag" one arm handstand. Then my partner dives from handstand and I go to chest stand with slide in the bowl. Then we do a synchronal handstand combination on the front platform. Then my partner and I do back walkover to the side platforms. I slide into the bowl to connect with my partner. A final handstand completes the act: I in a contortion position, my partner does a handstand on my elbows.

Another publicity photo from *Zumanity*.



What type of acts do you admire?

I really like solo and duo (male and female) aerial acts. These are beautiful acts. Of course I also love the hand-to-hand acrobatic duo acts, which is why I enjoy performing it myself. The key, of course, is

not so much the type of act, as the level of performance and presentation. Sometimes there can be extremely complex and difficult tricks, and the average spectator does not really appreciate that trick for its difficulty. Other times, you have a performance that is visually pleasing, but not as difficult. In my number with Valeriy, we try achieve both by combining various difficult acrobatic stunts with elements of dance, acting, choreography, etc.

Are there any specific performers here or in Russia that really stood out to you in talent, ability and showmanship?

Yes, that'll be the juggler Sergey Ignatov—one of the first jugglers who was able to toss up nine rings consecutively and collect all of the rings on his neck. I also really like Marina Osinskaya, who performed the high wire act (some 12-15 meters long) with point shoes. And of course, Anatoli Zalevski—a truly original performer in the hand-balancing genre who is unmatched in his technical ability and showmanship. Zalevski does some of the traditional hand-balancing tricks, like the one-arm flag or the crocodile, but in a unique style. I think many artists tried to do what Zalevski did, but I don't think anyone came close to his level of performance.

Many Bandwagon readers know Jim Judkins, owner of *Circus*

Chimera, and they would be very interested in your impression of touring with an American mud show.

This was my first circus job in America. This was a fun time! I played Alice in the circus's story "Alice in Wonderland." I got to see many states in the U. S., as we toured across the country. I had the opportunity to display my skills before different audiences in America. I really enjoyed performing in California, where more circus fans turned out to see the shows.

What was your first impression of America?

Fun! Lots of nice and smiling people . . . and the clothing is really cheap here. I did my first shopping in Walmart!

Where did you perform first?

In Texas. I found myself in a Texas desert, outside some small town. I was shocked, because I expected to see skyscrapers in America. Then I remember going to a country club and I was surprised to see so many elder people having fun and dancing. Russian grandmas and grandpas either sit home and watch TV serials or sit on a park bench and spread rumors! (Laughing)

Did you like the cookhouse on Chimera?

Oh, the Chimera cookhouse! Always full of surprises! I liked the fried-chicken they prepared, though sometimes they made it too spicy for me. Honestly, I tried to keep a diet and cooked "Borsch" (Russian soup with cabbage, beets, carrots, potatoes and beef) for myself.

Did you live in a camper or trailer on Chimera?

I lived in a camper. It was cute. I am small anyway, so I fit there all right. The Chimera camper was my first home in America and this was a very exciting time in my life. Everything was new and different. In Chimera each day of performing under a tent was different. Depending on where we performed, the stage was different, the weather was different, etc. I learned to perform no matter the condition of the stage. Sometimes the stage was wobbling from the wind or dripping rain, with no air conditioner, fan or heat. This was a difficult and interesting and fun experience!

How would you compare your experience in Circus Chimera to that of Cirque du Soleil.

What I like about Cirque du Soleil is the comfort afforded to artists (again, the massages, the costumes are always clean and ready, and every accommodation is made to the artists). Circus Chimera provided room and board and the stage--sometimes wet and sometimes muddy [laughing]! But what I loved about Chimera was its small cast and the flexibility afforded to solo

artists; as an artist I could add or modify acrobatic elements in my performance.

Are the acts the same in America and Russia? Aren't there more wild animal acts in Russia?

Yes, there are more wild animal acts in Russia. To be honest, I think the animals are better trained in Russia, though this of course means that they work a lot harder. In America people are very vocal and concerned about animal abuse--and rightfully so, I think.

Were you active while the Communists were still in power? It would be very interesting to know how things changed after the USSR broke up.

When the Soviet Union broke up, I was only four or five years of age. I went to school in 1991, when wearing the "Young Octobrian" uniform, which commemorated the 1917 Communist revolution, was becoming optional. The school followed strict dress code: uniforms in blue or brown had to be worn. Being an adventurer and one who liked to break the rules, I went to my first day in school wearing a bright red Addidas sport suit and felt really happy. This was shocking to my teachers, who gave me dirty looks. When they found out about my training in circus, they never took me seriously, calling me "zirkachka," Russian for a female circus artist, with a tone that connoted "circus freak." However, every time they held some sort of event or concert at school, I was invited to give a performance. Then the same teachers would applaud! One of them, so skeptical of my circus training, said to me once, "Well, I hope you can earn a living doing these crazy tricks."

And here you are, a principal artist in a Cirque du Soleil production in Las Vegas! What do you think those Russian teachers would say now?

I am sure they would be extremely proud of me! We would have a lot to remember and laugh about!

You have been performing with Cirque du Soleil since 2007. What's next?

I love my job at Cirque du Soleil. There's nothing like being in the spotlight twice a night on a Cirque du Soleil stage in Las Vegas. I am still young, only twenty-three, and I intend to be with Cirque du Soleil as an artist for as long as possible. Perhaps someday I will coach circus acrobatics like my mother coached me. I don't have a family of my own yet, but I would certainly like to continue the circus tradition in my family.



Help the OABA and its supporters maintain the right of Circuses and USDA licensed performing animal owners to provide Americans with educational exhibits and performances of exotic animals.

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THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT!

The Circus Historical Society Convention Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 2009

By Steve Gossard

Wisconsin in July is a beautiful landscape of green carpeted bean fields and tall green corn stretching to the horizon. To approach Milwaukee you pass through generic suburbs much like any large city; interstate rest stops and fast food fuel exits; but the city itself has a wonderful skyline of old and new architecture, like a forest of locust and sumac that has grown up among the stately oak and walnut trees. The city has a character that one can easily wear like a soft down jacket. My wife Kathy and I found there a Starbucks with mocha chip frapaccinos, a nice community market, a welcome Borders book store, and a 150 year old Methodist church where they hold an informal "cappuccino service" every Sunday morning. I had an easy affection for the city, and it provided a splendid backdrop for the Great Circus Parade. This was the setting for the 2009 convention of the Circus Historical Society.

Our view from the window of the Comfort Inn on State Street pictured a tree lined street with neat stone apartment buildings and a brief view of a lush green park with the vastness of Lake Michigan beyond. With the curtains opened the city, the park, the show grounds and the colorful big top beckoned us. Our packet of convention goodies contained tickets for the show, the parade, two lunches and the banquet dinner. It was enough that we could easily imagine what was in store for us over the next three days.

Thursday, July 9: Registration followed by the Social Hour: As always, it was great to mingle, see all of our old friends



and make new acquaintances.

Friday, July 10: Vice-President Judy Griffin welcomed everyone, after which brief and sincere eulogies were given for two old friends that we had lost in the last few weeks. Dale Riker was remembered as an enthusiastic, hard-working circus fan. He and his wife Evelyn spent most of their time and energy after retirement doing volunteer work at the Great Circus Parade and at the John and Mable Ringling Art Museum in Sarasota.

Judy Griffin, CHS VP and convention chair. All photos by Jim Gilmore.

Former President Stuart Thayer was next memorialized for his achievements in the field of circus historical study. They could not be overstated. He truly was the Dean of circus historians.

10:00: "Circus Business, 1930-Present." John Frazier, performer, concessionaire and manager provided a fascinating and amusing account of his growing up in the circus business. Antedotes from old showmen like Johnnie are a mainstay of historical research, and his presentation was warmly received.

11:00: "Top Ten Lessons Learned at the Most Exclusive School in the Nation--Clown College." Larry Sayler extolled the lessons he learned in Clown College, both inside and outside of class, as a model for life; from appreciation of tradition to standards of excellence and discipline to open minded pragmatism. Comedy is serious business.

12:00: Lunch. With lively conversation and great choices

John Frazier



Larry Sayler



Amy Fulkerson

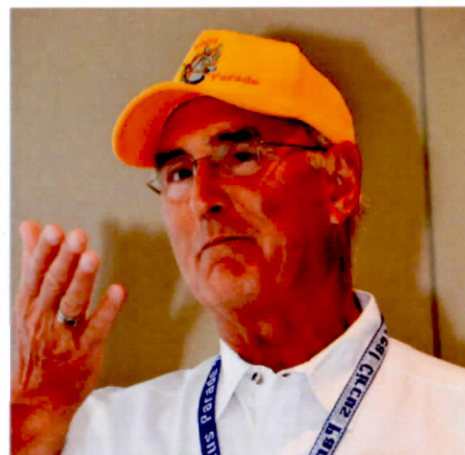




Neil Cockerline



Richard Georgian



John Lloyd

the menu we all relaxed in the afternoon sunlight until it became embarrassingly obvious that dessert was not forthcoming, and we returned to the conference room.

1:30: "Frederick Warrell in Person." John Lloyd gave a presentation on Ringling executive Fred Warrell that included rare photos of the winter quarters as well as a remarkable memo by Charles Ringling on circus logistics in the 1920s.

2:00: "Status of the Hertzberg Circus Collection." Amy Fulkerson presented a brief history of the collection of San Antonio lawyer and civic leader Harry Hertzberg. Following his death, Hertzberg left his collection to the San Antonio Public Library, and after the library couldn't care for it, to the Witte Museum. Fulkerson explained how it grew over the years from about 20,000 items to over 40,000. The museum has plans to move into a new building in 2010 with visible storage and an expanded research staff.

3:15: "Col. Bill's Early American Circus." After a short break Neil Cockerline chronicled the professional life and times of Bill Voorheis of Saginaw, Michigan. The former big band drummer bought a circus in 1970 and employed acts from the Chicago area to tour the lake region of Illinois, Wisconsin and Indiana. Cockerline had worked as a clown with Voorheis's circus in 1976, the only year that the Col. Bill circus used a tent.

4:00: "Hold Your Horses, and They Didn't." In this session

Richard Georgian detailed a number of incidents when the routine of circus parades was interrupted by exceptional events. He began with the most sensational: the 1899 Princeton Riot during the Pawnee Bill show parade. Georgian followed with an incident on the Forepaugh show in 1878, when the Goddess of Liberty figure atop a parade wagon was nearly unseated by a telephone line. Another strange event was the Jones Brothers' show calliope being struck by a train.

8:00: CHS auction.

Saturday, July 11: 9:00: "Conversations on the Contemporary Circus." Although Lane Talbert could not be present, he sent two videos of interviews he had done with two fascinating showmen the month before in Las Vegas, Bill Witter and Darrel Hawkins.

Witter went to Clown College, learned to ride a unicycle, and was soon after recruited by Charlie Bauman to be a clown ringmaster. His first year with the show, 1976, he became an understudy to Harold Ronk. When the show reached Los Angeles he had to fill in when Ronk developed laryngitis, becoming the first white faced ringmaster in the business. The next year Witter assumed all of the ringmaster duties when Ronk took time off. In 1978 he left the show to work as an actor, and later taught at Clown College. He later appeared in the play *Barnum*, on Broadway, in London and South Africa.

Bob Unterreiner



Joe Parker



Matt Wittmann



Darrel Hawkins was raised in Emporia, Kansas near the winter quarters of the Bud Anderson's Circus. He knew Bud's son Knute Anderson well, and worked with the show for part of the 1944 season. Bud taught him to spin a rope and do trick riding. He then worked as a cowboy throughout the western states for a number of years. Hawkins then worked for the Clyde Beatty Circus from 1953 to 1955.

At age 58, in 1988, he joined the Culpepper and Merriweather Circus at Buckeye, Arizona. My wife and I saw this charming little show several times when they toured through Illinois, and we were fascinated with his rope performance. It was obvious that he loved the work, even at \$20 a day for seven days a week. He also sold popcorn with



David Carlyon



John Ringling North II



Ward Hall

the show, and operated the electrical plant. His wife Doris did the bookkeeping with the show, and eventually worked into the act. Though virtually retired, Hawkins still does one or two shows a month freelancing.

10:30: "Kirby 'Sky King' Grant and his Career on the Carson & Barnes Circus." Kirby Grant, Neil Cockerline told us, was known as "Sky King" on the television program by the same name in the 1950s. He began his show business career as a violin prodigy, had his own big band in the 1920s, and became a singing lead character in "B" western movies. He starred in seven movies before taking the lead role in the television series "Sky King." Grant joined the Carson and Barnes show after the series went off the air in 1965. He later retired to Florida, where he spent time raising money for charities. He died in an automobile accident in 1985.

11:00: "The Ringling Museum and Ca d'Zan." Director John Wettenhal provided a detailed description of the current status and future plans for the museum. He stated that the Ringling rail car had been moved into the museum, and a generous donation will provide restoration. The museum has digitalized an amazing 20,000 photos, and seeks to link the major collections on-line in a project that will provide access world wide to create a central internet museum.

12:00: Lunch.

1:00: "A View of Chicago Circus History." After lunch, Robert Unterreiner listed 20 different circuses that showed or were quartered in Chicago since 1910. He began with a general history of circus activity in Chicago since the first show in 1836. Among the other large circuses mentioned were the Cole Brothers, Forepaugh-Sells, Hagenbeck-Wallace, Cristiani Bros., Buffalo Bill's Wild West, 101 Ranch, Tim

McCoy's Wild West, Tom Mix, the Big Apple Circus, Carson and Barnes, Universoul, and of course Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey. He listed a number of important show lots including Chicago Stadium, Grant Park, Navy Pier, Soldier Field, the International Amphitheater, the Medina Shrine Temple, and the Rosemont Horizon.

1:30: "The Circus World Museum in 2009 and Beyond." Director Steve Freese reviewed activity at the Circus World Museum.

2:00: "Pirating the Pacific: the Fiji Cannibals and P. T. Barnum's Great Traveling World's Fair." Matt Wittman chronicled the sensational exploitation of the island people of Fiji by showmen. He began with the history of the cotton plan-

tations there in the 1860s, and continued with the story of the missionaries and their followers who were killed and consumed by cannibals in 1867. He described the clashes between the islanders themselves, and how that led to the capture and sale of Fiji natives to P. T. Barnum in 1872. A sensational fiction was concocted to build morbid public interest.

3:00: "What Else Happened Then?" Joe Parker noted six pre-Civil War circus events, and placed them in their historical context by comparing them to profound world changes. For example, in 1793 John Bill Rickets began the first American while Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were executed by the Paris mob. When the Crowninshield elephant was brought to America in 1796 Edward Jenner administered the first small pox vaccine, Tennessee became a state, and British forces returned to England.

The same year, 1825, that Joshua Purdy Brown erected the first tented circus in America the Erie Canal was completed, the first steam railroad carried passengers, the first California vineyards were planted and carbonated fountain drinks were introduced.

4:00 (or so): "Uneasy Lies the Crown." The final session was provided by David Carlyon, who listed five lessons learned in clown school. Here they are, as near as I could understand them:

- 1.) Audiences laugh at the makeup (they are polite).
- 2.) Clown College was a two month audition. You don't really learn to clown in Clown College, you learn to clown from the audience.
- 3.) You learn clowning from the veteran clowns.
- 4.) You learn from failure.



Steve Freese



Jim Royal, John Ringling North II and Al Stencell



John Wettenhal



The head table at the banquet.

5.) You learn from the "blue alley." The Ringling Red show was very regimented, but the Blue show was open and flexible.

5:00: Social Hour and Banquet. John Ringling North II gave an interesting talk about how he came to purchase the Kelly Miller Circus. He promised that his speech would be short, and it took less than fifteen minutes, leaving the conventioners just enough time to make it to:

7:15: Kelly Miller Circus performance.

Sunday, July 12: The Great Circus Parade. Wonder of wonders, the parade was much, much more than the sum total of its many marvelous parts. Anyone and everyone who is even remotely interested in the circus, past and present, really should see it, if we are lucky enough to have it again.

The Great Circus parade.



The Great Circus Parade featured fifty wagons to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Circus World Museum. It was the third largest parade in America, lasting two hours, which seemed to go much too fast. The breeze off of the lake and the downtown architecture provided a great environment for the event.

After the parade we stopped off for a frappuccino at Starbucks, took a long stroll through the Grohmann Museum of the Working Man, and ate an awesome brick of lasagna at an Italian restaurant. On Monday we retraced our journey across the rolling Midwestern landscape, back home to Bloomington, Illinois, site of the 2010 Circus Historical Society Convention.

The Great Circus parade.



THE 1928 SPARKS PARADE

In 1928 the Sparks Circus traveled on twenty cars. The show presented a respectable parade that included 6 tableau wagons; 12 cages; 28 mounted people; 8 ponies; 88 head of baggage stock; 5 camels; 3 zebras; 3 llamas and 9 elephants.

The 1928 parade order:

The parade marshal.

Two mounted men flag bearers.

No. 1 bandwagon (#25 or 40) pulled by 8 dapple gray hitch, carrying half of the big show band.

#12 cage, monkeys, 4 black horse hitch.

#10 cage, polar bears, 6 dapple gray hitch.

12 Mounted ladies in riding costumes.

11 Mounted man in riding costume.

#12 cage, lions, pulled by 6 dapple gray hitch.

12 foot cage with spotted deer, 4 dapple gray hitch.

#29 wagon, air calliope, 8 pony hitch.

12 foot cage, lions, 4 dapple gray hitch.

12 foot cage, tigers, 4 dapple gray hitch.

#2 bandwagon (#25 or 40), half of big show band, 8 dapple gray hitch.

12 foot cage, leopards, 4 dapple gray hitch.

12 foot cage, kangaroos and 2 ostriches, 4 dapple gray hitch.

#18 Girl and horse head tableau, clown band, 6 dapple gray hitch.

12 foot cage, leopards, 4 dapple gray hitch.

#11 cage, tigers, 6 dapple gray hitch.

#56 Clowns behind curtain tableau, side show band, 4 dapple gray hitch.

12 foot cage, hyenas and 2 black leopards, 4 dapple gray hitch.

12 foot cage, seals, 4 dapple gray hitch.

12 Mounted people, wild west contingent.

5 camels in single file, led by grooms in Turkish costumes.

3 Zebras walking abreast, groom dressed as Turk.

3 Llamas led by 2 grooms.

9 Elephants in single file, a bull man with each.

#50 Steam calliope, pulled by 6 dapple gray hitch.

All twelve cages were paraded.

Fred D. Pfening, Jr.



The parade marshal and flag bearers.

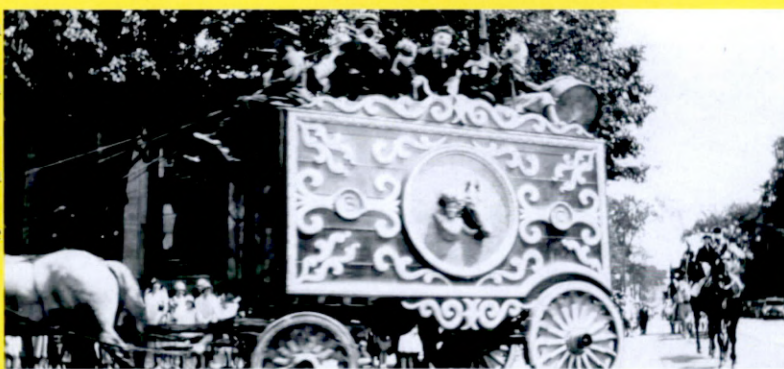


The No. 1 bandwagon with half of the big show band.



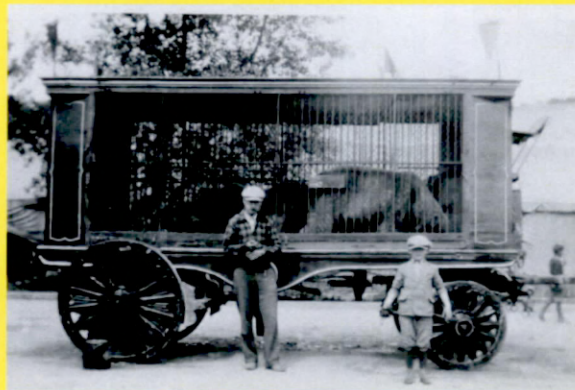
The No. 2 bandwagon with the other half of the big show band.

The clown bandwagon.





Cage carrying tigers..



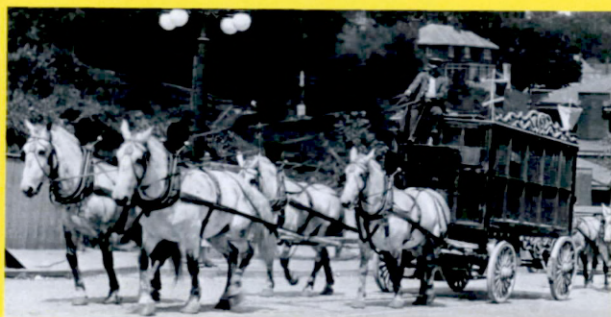
Cage #10 polar bears.



The air calliope pulled by Mack truck.



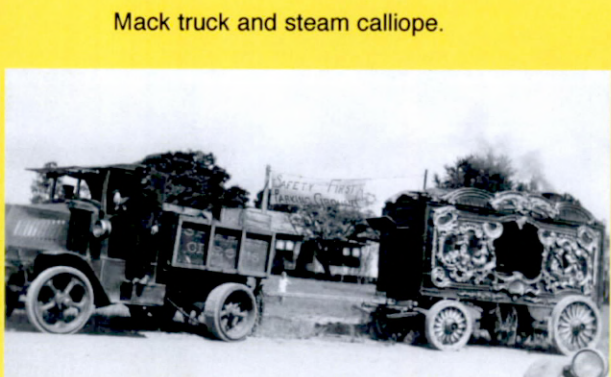
The side show band.



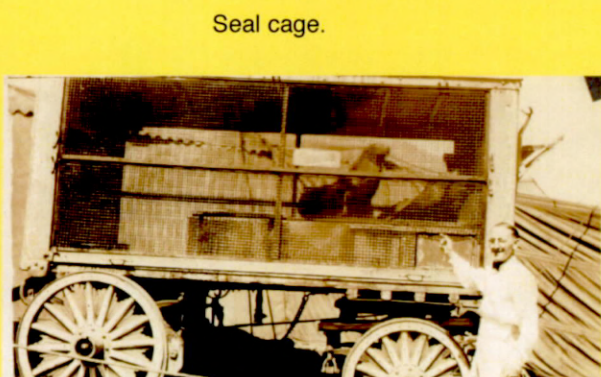
Cage No. 12 carrying monkeys.



Cage No. 14 carrying lions.



Mack truck and steam calliope.



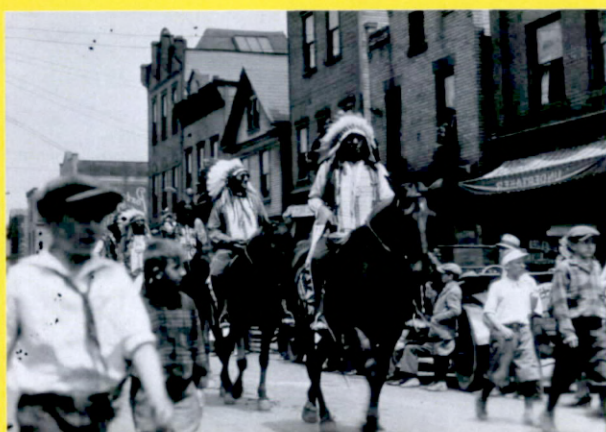
Seal cage.



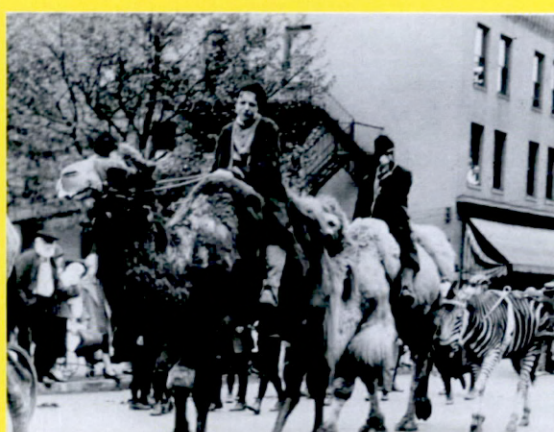
Large cage carrying lions.



Long cage carrying lions.



Indians.



Camels with riders.



Cage No. 28 with tigers.



Nine elephants in parade.



Cages in back yard lined up for wild animal acts in the big show.

Rob Mermin

At the Circus Historical Society Convention September 23, 2008

I had no written speech to transcribe here. The fun part of my presentation was the film footage. So I reckon the best way to relate what I said is by narrating it as if I was a reporter at my own event:

Rob Mermin, Founder of Circus Smirkus and former Dean of Clown College, strode up to the podium and immediately launched into a rhetorical discussion of fact vs. myth. "Let's face it," he said, "Circus in America has an image problem." He eyed the enrapt audience. They were enrapt indeed, wrapped up digesting the fabulous luncheon spread they were torn away from to hear him speak. Mermin then listed, and dispelled, a few "myths" the general public enjoys: 1) Circus people are dishonest, dirty, double-dealing low-life. (Aside from himself, he said, it ain't true.) 2) A circus represents chaos and disorder in the American vernacular. 3) Who really "runs away to join the circus" anymore?

Rob described how he ran away to join the European circus in 1969, first picking up with Circus Hoffman in Wales. Rob told several unbelievable anecdotes about clowning with what he called "the five infamous Hoffman brothers." They called it "The Wildest Show On Earth" for good reason, as they were chased by the police out of every town. The historic film footage of the Hoffman show in action is truly hilarious. The rapt audience woke up in joy and amazement at this point.

Following this, Rob showed film clips from his 3 years with the Benneweis show in Copenhagen's famous circus building. He related stories about the great European acts he worked with there, including clowns Francesco Caroli, Charlie Rivel, Galetti, Joe Jackson, Jr., and stars like Manfred Doval, the Young Brothers, and Frances and Lottie Brunn.

From Copenhagen, Rob took us to Sweden with Circus Scott, where he toured as Karl Kossmayer's partner in the Unrideable Mule act. Film clips of Kossmayer showed this to truly be one of the classic mule acts of all time, dating back to Dan Rice himself.

Finally, Rob brought us up to date with stories and film clips from his own Circus Smirkus. This was truly a remarkable feat: trying to start a professional quality tent circus in the backwoods of rural Vermont. But during 21 years in business, Smirkus has had 28 countries represented in its ring, and continues to send alumni around the world as professionals in all the big shows. Smirkus is the only touring international youth circus in America with a season under canvas in a 800-seat European Big Top. They have toured the former Soviet Union and received the title "The United Nations of the Youth Circus World."

Mermin summarized his thoughts on circus--and clowning--in America by comparing the film clips he showed. The Hoffman show epitomized what mud shows might have been in America 100 years ago. Circus Benneweis is a classic example of sophisticated yet traditional European circus in a building devoted to circus. Mermin noted that John Bill Ricketts in the 1790's built numerous circus-specific buildings wherever he took his shows for a lengthy stay. He



lamented the fact that the permanent circus building tradition didn't stick in America, as it did in Europe. It was his intention with Circus Smirkus, Mermin said, to combine the classy show style of Europe, with the traditional touring mud show experience that could reach small towns the big shows won't play. In addition, he wanted American teens to get excited by circus through the apprentice method: living the lifestyle, learning the customs and traditions, and training with old pros.

As for clowning, Mermin mentioned that like that other native art form--jazz--good old American knockabout slapstick is another fine tradition, and when done with finesse and exported, it is loved around the world. Of course, he said when asked, American clowns can work successfully in the European ring; they are starving for good old time knockabout. He lamented the closing of Clown College, the best place for carrying on the traditions of real good slapstick, American style.

There is a difference, he noted, between theatrical stage clowning, and those who also know how to connect with an audience in the round, in the ring, under canvas, living in a caravan. For Mermin, an American clown with a European circus background, there is nothing quite equal to seeing a beloved old circus clown entering the ring to familiar welcoming applause.

Rob Mermin, Founder of Circus Smirkus, was Dean of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus Clown College in 1995, and a clown in European circuses in the 1970's and 1880's.

Phone Promoters

And Other Interesting People

By Mike Straka

THE WIZARD OF ODD

Each year, our tour would spend five to six weeks playing dates in Canada. We used Canadian promoters because our guys couldn't cross the border. Most of them had outstanding requests to appear before a judge. We were scheduled to perform at three Toronto theaters. All three dates were booked and promoted by Al Stencell. Al owned and operated a very successful tented circus in Canada for many years. He was an experienced promoter. The opening date and the second one went very well. The third one ended up a little odd.

Our cast loaded the show into the theater for set-up. The theater was old, dark and musty. It had a makeshift stage because it was primarily a movie house. We managed to get the show on the stage and got ready to present an evening show.

I wandered out to the lobby to check on the box office. As I was talking with Al, I noticed that all the poster boxes were

covered over with butcher paper. This seemed odd but, it wasn't my theater. I would be gone in a few hours.

During this national tour we were presenting "The Magical Land of Oz." This was the story of the famous Wizard of Oz, with the addition of magic and circus acts. We had a talented cast of New York actors and actresses. We even had Toto too!

When the theater lights went down and Dorothy entered the land of Oz, we knew it would be a tough night. Our audience consisted of a family with three kids and about 12-15 men scattered throughout the house. This was very unusual. We were doing a family kid show. Single men did not come to see our show. But hey, this was Canada.

After fifteen minutes, most of the men got up and left. We finished the show with a single family--five people.

After the show, I went out to settle the box office. This took all of thirty seconds. As a rule, our show didn't do much on the day of the show. Most towns did fifty to one hundred dollars at the gate. While Al and I cut a few jackpots, I noticed the theater manager taking down the butcher paper. Once I saw the posters, the whole day became clear. Al had booked our show into a porno theater! Perhaps the "gentlemen" were waiting for Dorothy to strip and head down the yellow brick road. Obviously our show didn't meet their expectations.

Well, Blow Me Down

I thought it would be useful to document the creation of the show "Amazing Adventure in Cartoonland." For those of us that toured with it, we called it the Popeye Show.

In the fall of 1981, producer Philip Morris obtained the stage rights for a number of King Features characters. Among others, King owned the rights to Popeye, Flash Gordon, Heckle and Jeckle, Tom and Jerry, and Mighty Mouse. Mr. Morris set about to create an arena show featuring these cartoon characters. I was transferred from our phone shows to manage this unit.

The costumes were built at Morris headquarters in Charlotte, North Carolina. The physical set and props were built by Tom Width, outside of Richmond, Virginia. Rehearsals for the show took place in Petersburg, Virginia. I cast the show in Nashville, Charlotte and New York City. We had a cast of eighteen people. The entire show was on tape and the original music and the score was done by the Richmond Symphony Orchestra.

The route and advance were handled by Bill English. The plan was to have a phone room sell ads in a program book in each city. Tickets for this show would only be sold at the box office and ticket outlets. Ticket prices averaged \$5.00, one price for both adults and kids. This was well before the misguided "FREE" kids' tickets. The promotions were start-





ed six to eight weeks before our scheduled opening.

The first problem to come up, and there would be many, was a lack of promoters. It was so bad that they sent me to Jamestown, North Dakota to set-up and run a phone room. This was my one and only experience actually running a phone room. How hard could it be? I held a degree from Lycoming College and advance course work. Like most things, the devil is in the details.

I arrived in Jamestown and checked out the phone room. It was a rented storefront and the phones had been removed. In fact, the phone lines were gone. It would take six weeks to get new phones installed. I had three weeks to get this done and return for rehearsals. My solution was to rent another motel room where I was staying. It had two lines, so I had a total of three phones to work with.

I was promised that I would receive the "tap" cards for this city. Tap cards have the business owners name and a short history of previous sales. We had played this town for many years and had promoters with cards. The cards never showed up. We had to cold call each merchant and hope to get the owner on the phone.

My gross sales after three weeks was a meager \$2300. It was hard, disappointing work. Bill English was kind to me, after all, I was helping the show out in a pinch. His only comment was "It's not as easy as it looks." That was an understatement!

We rehearsed and opened the show on October 4th, 1981 in Bismarck, North Dakota at the Civic Center. The show's problems increased as successive days produced small crowds. The grosses from the program books did not close the gaps. Simply put--kids didn't really know or care about these characters. The parents grew up with Popeye, but the kids could care less.

Mr. Morris sent increasing amounts of money out to the show to keep it going. Finally, with little prospects for success, Morris and English decided to close the show. I cannot remember our final date, although I do know we made it to Texas. My route sheet has several cities crossed out. I do know we did not make every city.

We made our final payroll and arraigned to get everyone home. My stage manager and I drove the two 24 foot Ryder trucks back to Charlotte.

This story does have a happy ending. In 1991, we dusted off the old music tapes and recut small sections of the original show. We created "Popeye's Magic Circus." The formula was similar each year. You take one road manager/magician/juggler, add one clown, mix in one circus act. I would M.C. and do twenty min-

utes of magic and juggling. The clown du jour would do twenty minutes. The circus act would perform two or three turns. Popeye and Olive Oyl would do three scenes in the show.

Throughout the many years and tours, I worked with many great performers. A small list would include Bingo the Clown (Tom Lyons), the Goetschis, the Wainwrights, Pedro and Sheila Morales, Joy T. Clown and the Dunnerdales.

Of course, our Popeye and Olive Oyl were actors in oversize costumes. Large paper mache heads provided limited sight for the actors. During one of our more memorable engagements, we had an event that everyone on the tour would remember.

We were playing a high school auditorium with a full stage and an orchestra pit. The opening of the show had the entire cast styling Popeye's first appearance. The actor overshot his mark and walked right off the stage into the pit. It was not a soft landing. He had fallen more than ten feet and landed on several music stands. I jumped to the stage steps and made my way to the fallen actor.

When I removed his "head," he looked at me and said, "Well, blow me down, do you have any spinach?" He was OK and not hurt. I told him to get his cartoon butt back up on the stage. When I escorted him up the steps, Popeye received a standing ovation, albeit the hard way.

A Horse Tale

In 1984 I embarked on a new profession. I became a promoter of big name talent. It all started with a chance meeting with a rabbi. Ben Morrow was a legendary promoter. He had started with Abe Sapperstein and the Harlem Globetrotters in 1952. By 1984, Ben was eyeing retirement. He was studying to become a rabbi. This was what he wanted to do in retirement. He was also looking for someone to take over the business. We embarked on a wonderful 11 year journey.



During this time we promoted hundreds of shows including, Ice Capades, the Globetrotters, Sesame Street Live, Johnny Cash, Kenny Rogers and the Royal Lipizzaner Stallions. This is where the tale begins.

In the fall of 1991 I received a call from Gary Lashinsky, the owner of the Royal Lipizzaner Show. Gary was in a fix. He needed to fill in a date somewhere in western Pennsylvania. I was also managing tours for Popeye's Magic Circus and had a four-week tour coming up. I told Gary I could find him a place and do a quick promotion.

I remembered that I had played Oil City, Pennsylvania in the early 1970's. I thought the high school gym might just work. I placed a call to the principal and proposed that the school sponsor this and use it as a fund-raiser.

The whole secret to booking is to head off objections. "You must be nuts. You can't bring horses on our gym floor." I would calmly explain that the show covered the entire floor with Homesote, a sound-deadening material. Many circuses do the same thing for indoor dates.

The second secret is to hammer home that the promoter will do everything. After all, this was my job. Principals have enough to do. Finally, I emphasized that the school club will make a lot of money. With a little effort, the principal signed onto the project.

I made a quick trip to the town to place our advertising schedule, line up radio promotions and create ticket outlets. My first stop was the school to check out the gym. I needed to print tickets and created a seating plan for 1100 tickets.

I could tell you that my creative promotions and clever advertising sold out the date. The truth is nothing like this had EVER come to Oil City. We sold out in under a week. I thought the hard part was behind me.

I drove to Oil City early on the day of the performance. I had to collect the receipts from the ticket locations. I always enjoyed the merchant that handed me a cigar box of unsold tickets in no particular order. In addition, I



had to have tear sheets and affidavits of all the advertising that I had spent. This amount came off the top of the gross sales.

I arrived at the school about 5:30 p. m. The show was scheduled for 7:30 p. m. The show manager saw me and made a beeline toward me. He said, "We have a major problem and you need to fix it."

"OK, what's up" I replied. We walked outside the gym and he pointed to the three steps leading up to the gym.

"This is the problem.

You booked a place with three steps. We'll have to cancel."

My mind was spinning. Cancelling was not an option. I would be out thousands of dollars. Calmly I asked why three steps would be a problem. He gave me a look like I was a complete idiot. "The horses can't go up steps. Fix it or we cancel, you have an hour."

I couldn't believe this. The stallions perform unbelievable feats in the show. They manage to jump straight up and kick out all four legs. They march, sidestep, jump but they can't walk up three steps.

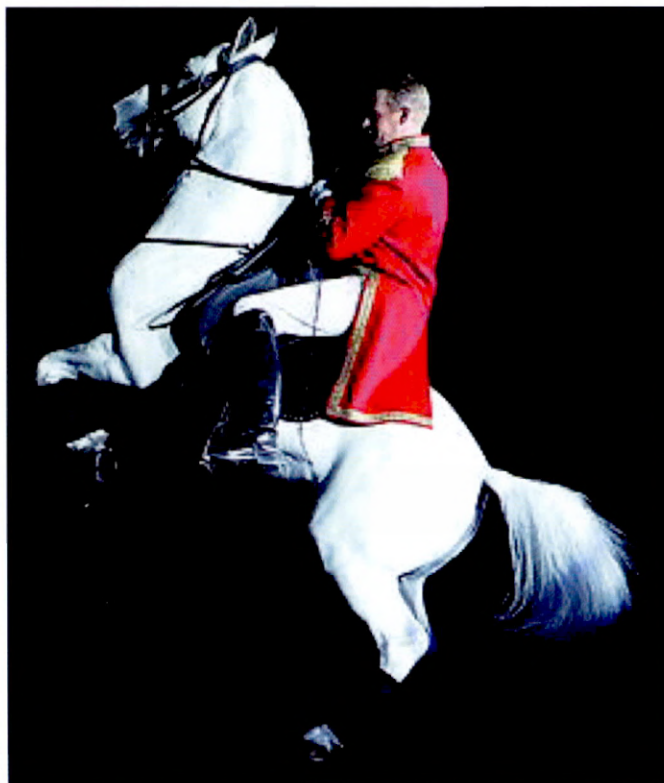
I told him not to worry. I would fix things. I needed a small miracle and fast. It seems that someone was listening.

I received a miracle that came down from above. Literally.

The school was undergoing a roof replacement. As I stood there trying to figure out what to do, four guys came down a ladder. Roofers, plywood men with tools! I ran over and asked them if they wanted to make a quick \$50. The one guy laughed and wanted to know who they had to kill.

In twenty-two minutes flat, I was the proud owner of a first class removable horse ramp. It spanned the three steps and even had cross strips on the surface.

The show manager walked out and gave his blessing to the ramp. He did ask, "How in the heck did you . . . forget it." The horses were walked in and we had a great night in Oil City.



Remembering Frankie Saluto



I grew up believing Frankie was uncle, that was mainly because he always introduced me to everyone as his nephew. I not only got to meet but I had the honor of getting to know such greats as Felix Adler, Lou Jacobs, Otto Griebeling, Prince Paul, Emmett Kelly Sr. and many more. My family was active in circuses and carnivals, dating from the late 1890's to the early 1900's. and met Frankie when he was around 28. I have many never before seen pictures of Frankie and Felix, which I plan to include in a book I hope to write next year.

I will always cherish the fond memories I have of Frankie, memories that most children will only experience in dreams. This man who was short in stature never failed to make me feel 10 feet tall. This world is a far better place because this giant of a man dedicated his life to making people laugh. I miss you and will never forget you. Your Nephew, Ray Henderson

